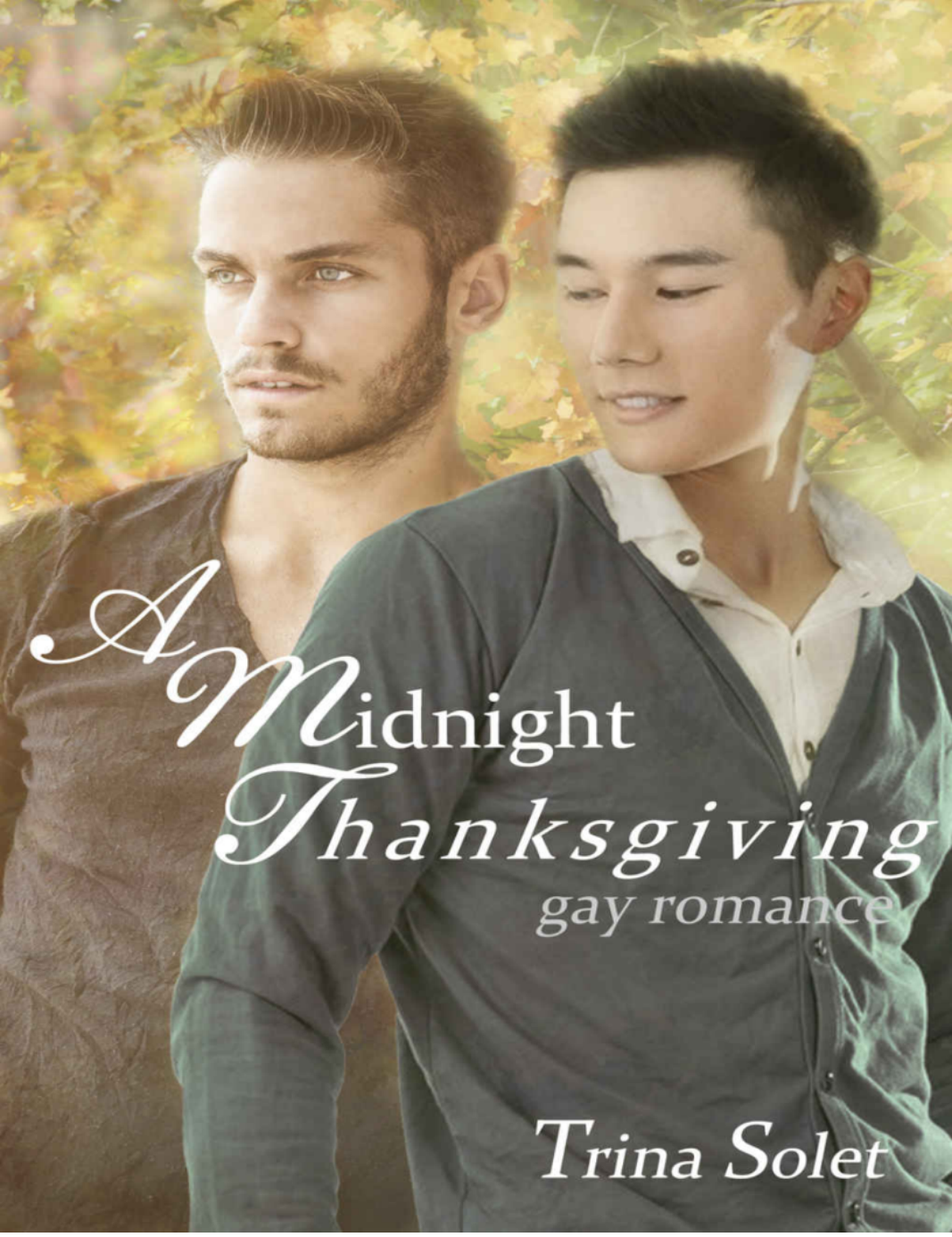

A Midnight Thanksgiving
gay romance
Trina Solet

A Midnight Thanksgiving
By Trina Solet
Copyright © 2016 by Trina Solet
All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.
This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, locales or actual events is entirely coincidental.
All sexual activity takes place between persons eighteen years of age or older.
This novel contains material intended for mature readers.
Cover image is only for illustrative purposes. Any person depicted is a model.

A Midnight Thanksgiving

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Chapter 1

Walking up to the red brick facade of Paul's apartment building, Vaughn stopped and looked up at the tenth story windows. That's where he was spending his Thanksgiving. If he had to spend it alone, he would have been fine.

It had been a while since Vaughn felt like he belonged at a family gathering. Whether it was family or stepfamily, he felt like an outsider. It wouldn't be like that at Paul's. Paul had his own bullying way of making everyone appreciate his hospitality or else.

When Vaughn told him he might just do his own thing on Thanksgiving, maybe order some takeout, Paul wouldn't hear of it. "No friend of mine is spending Thanksgiving alone like some pathetic loser. You get your ass over here so Carlos and I can feed you."

Carlos was Paul's boyfriend and a chef in training. Paul was very proud of his cooking skills and loved to show them off, maybe because he had no cooking skills of his own. He could mix a mean drink though. Thanksgiving dinner was at Paul's place and they had already invited a few other friends to join them. At least Vaughn wouldn't be a third wheel if he agreed to go.

In the end, it was easier to say yes then get harangued to death by that guy. Now here he was, heading to Paul's, and he wasn't the only one. As Vaughn lingered at the corner, he spotted Alex Yee. Alex had crossed the street and was now walking ahead of him toward the front doors of the building.

Vaughn was going the same way but made no effort to catch up. While Alex strolled well ahead of him, Vaughn's eyes ran over his slim body. With Alex wearing a longish jacket, he couldn't see much. Vaughn was going mostly from memory when he pictured his pert ass and nicely defined chest and arms. He had seen more of him in warmer weather when Alex wasn't wearing so many clothes, but it's not like Vaughn memorized him.

He might have a nice body, but otherwise Alex was kind of infuriating. His mouth never stopped running and he had no sense of responsibility. Still, for some reason Vaughn couldn't seem to avoid him.

They always ended up in the same class at least once every term. Alex was even working for the college paper for a short time. Their friends all knew each other, so it was almost like they were friends by default. And now here they were apparently having Thanksgiving together.

When he reached the front doors of the building, Alex backed in, leaning against the door to open it. He was turned toward him, but he

hadn't noticed Vaughn yet because he was busy texting and walking. Alex only noticed him once he was already in the elevator and Vaughn was in the lobby, calling out to him to hold the doors. "I'm going up too," he said as he jogged over.

"Close, close, close," Alex kept saying as he jabbed the close button even after Vaughn stepped through the doors to stand right next to him.

"Would you stop pushing the close button? I'm already in. Push ten."

"Maybe I changed my mind. Maybe I'm not going."

Vaughn didn't take him seriously even for a minute. "Just push ten," he told him, but Alex only pouted at him.

Sighing, Vaughn leaned past him to press the button. He wished he hadn't. The move put him too close to Alex, and the pouting drew his gaze to Alex's full lips. It must be something to kiss lips like those.

Catching himself fantasizing about kissing Alex of all people, Vaughn dragged his eyes away from him. Alex might be cute, damn cute, but he was not someone he wanted to fantasize about. Plus if Alex caught him doing it, he would never hear the end of it.

Alex hadn't noticed anything though. The only thing he was interested in right now was the contents of the shopping bag Vaughn carried. "What did you bring? What do you have in there?" he asked and tried to sneak a peek inside the bag.

"Paul told me we all had to contribute. He said to bring this spiced rum. It's for some cocktail he wants to make," Vaughn told him and pulled the bag away from him.

"I knew it. I knew I smelled something good," Alex claimed.

"There is no way you could smell a bottle of rum."

"OK then, I have a sixth sense for spicy goodness."

Vaughn noticed that unlike him, Alex was empty handed. "And what did you bring?"

"Myself."

"I'm pretty sure Paul would have told you to bring more than just yourself," Vaughn told him.

"He did," Alex admitted sheepishly. "Paul said to bring something but I couldn't get my hands on it."

"Typical."

"It wasn't my fault. They had these pumpkin shaped punch bowls on sale, but Paul told me about them too late and they were all gone."

Vaughn made a face. "Punch bowl? That's probably where this stuff was headed," he said and raised the shopping bag with rum. "For once it's a good thing you screwed it up. I hate punch."

"What don't you hate?" Alex said just as the elevator doors opened.

Childishly, Vaughn wanted to say cookies. He didn't have a sweet tooth, so why was he thinking about cookies. Looking at Alex out of

the corner of his eye, Vaughn realized that he smelled cookies when Alex leaned over to snoop inside his bag and before that when he was reaching to hit the button for the tenth floor.

Stepping out of the elevator, Vaughn asked him, "Why do you smell like cookies?"

Alex stopped him. "How dare you? What are you implying? That I scarfed down as many fresh baked cookies as I could get my hands on before my friend, Gail, slapped my hand away even though Paul ordered me to come to this dinner hungry?"

"I'm not the cookie police. Whatever," Vaughn said and turned away, but the truth was Alex smelled really good. It wasn't because of the cookie aroma, which he explained got on him because he was hovering near the oven waiting to make a grab for them. It was the underlying scent, which was fresh but masculine. The kind of scent that Vaughn might settle into like snuggling into bed, into warm sheets or hot flesh.

Damn. Why did he have to notice his scent? He needed to stop paying attention to Alex. Every new detail that came through the noise only gave him weird urges to kiss, grope, and smell him. All of those were unacceptable, especially all three together while he pressed Alex into the corner by the elevator and pushed himself between his legs.

The sound of the elevator going down jolted Vaughn out of his crazy, fugue state. While Vaughn stood there trying to catch his breath and regain his sanity, Alex tapped his chest. Even through the layers of his clothes, the contact was electric.

Alex then looked at him in warning. "Don't tell Paul about the cookie thing."

"I don't need to tell him. Your cookie stink will give you away," Vaughn pointed out while they made their way to the end of the hall.

"I plan to blame my delicious cookie stink on you. Stick close to me," Alex said and bumped his shoulder.

"Watch the booze," Vaughn told him as a shiver went through him, making him prickly and hot. He couldn't wait to take his scarf and his jacket off. He was already tugging at his scarf and unzipping his jacket when they stopped in front of Paul's apartment. As for Alex, he was bouncing on his toes, impatient for Paul to open the door. This was going to be some night.

*

Alex was looking forward to Thanksgiving, and since he couldn't be with his family this year, he was glad Paul and Carlos invited him over. It wasn't going to be a big shindig in Paul's tiny apartment, just a

few friends. Alex didn't realize that included Vaughn until he saw him heading for the elevator.

He was no fun, but at least he looked good. A fitted navy jacket, zipped up, accentuated his slim body and broad shoulders. Now as Paul was letting them in, Vaughn was taking off his jacket and unwrapping the chocolate brown scarf from around his neck. He looked way too good. Plus he had those big, blue eyes and dirty blond hair that he kept neatly trimmed.

Too bad he was hopelessly uptight and judgmental. Not Alex's type of guy at all. Especially not after his ex boyfriend, Cole. The last thing Alex needed was another guy who would judge him for crimes he didn't commit. Not that Vaughn would be interested in him anyway.

"Smells good in here," Vaughn said as they filed into the small living room and dining room combination.

"That's nothing. Carlos barely got started," Paul said.

"That's not good news," Alex complained. "You just had us come in early to tease us."

"I want you to pitch in. No free rides," Paul told him harshly as he took the bag with spiced rum from Vaughn, checked the label and nodded with approval.

"And where is your man?" Alex asked and looked toward the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

"My man is cooking, and no, you can't bug him," Paul said and blocked him from going into the kitchen. "He only got here from work a little while ago." Paul was still standing in the way as he got a text. "It's Val and Ursula. They said they need help. Ursula's ankle is still iffy," he said.

"I'll go," Alex volunteered.

"No. You can't be trusted with what they are bringing up," Paul told him. Now Alex was even more determined to go. "Get back," Paul ordered him. He tried to get Vaughn to go instead but couldn't enlist him because he was on the phone with his mom. "I guess I better do it myself. Don't touch anything. Either of you."

As Paul headed for the door, Alex took the opportunity to sneak into the kitchen. "Don't bother Carlos," Paul warned him as he saw him push open the swinging door into the kitchen.

"Hi, Alex," Carlos said from the sink without turning around. Of course he heard Paul yelling at him.

"I like what I see," Alex told him, taking in the setup in the small kitchen.

Every inch of counter space was crowded with food, bowls and cutting boards, but it wasn't a mess. It was all organized. A few pots and pans looked like they were ready to go on the stove or in the oven, but they were just sitting there.

"Paul said you just got here. How are you getting all this done?" Alex asked.

"I did a bunch of prep yesterday. That stuff just needs a few finishing touches." Carlos pointed to the pots and pans next to the stove. "I have to watch the timing when I fire all it. This oven is old and small, and only two of the burners work. It's going to be a challenge to keep everything warm."

The oven looked like an antique from the eighties. Alex spotted a pot on the stove that drew his interest. "Ooh, tell me that's pumpkin soup." He leaned over the pot with orange puree while Carlos pushed him back.

"Butternut squash," Carlos told him. "And it still needs broth and seasoning."

"I'll pretend it's pumpkin. Can I taste test?" Alex offered hopefully.

"There's nothing to taste. I told you this stuff isn't ready." Carlos then checked his phone and laughed. "My roommates are calling me a traitor. They wanted me to cook for them, but Paul has dibs on me."

"I don't get why you two don't live together," Alex said. Like this kitchen, the apartment was small but they could squeeze in. Paul was a control freak but obviously Carlos was super organized. It should work.

At first Carlos only laughed in response. "In close quarters, Paul would drive me right out of my mind. We'd be at each other's throats in a week."

Alex frowned. He got worried that what Carlos was saying meant that his two friends didn't have a future together. There was too much of that kind of thing going around – him and Cole, Zack and that asshole, Brad.

Carlos noticed the anxious look on his face. "Don't sweat it. It's only while I'm in school. When I'm earning some real money, Paul and I will be able to get a bigger place. That way we can spread out, stay out of each other's hair when we need to."

"OK. Good. My mind has been put at ease. Carry on," Alex said and saluted him.

Actually he did feel better, not just about Carlos and Paul's future but also about his own. He sometimes wondered if any guy would want to stay with him long term, much less live with him. When he dumped Cole, that jerk told him, "Good riddance. You're doing me a favor. I'm sick of having to put up with you. Your mouth never stops. Living with you would be fucking hell."

"You didn't let him touch anything, did you?" Paul asked from behind Alex and made him jump. Carlos only shook his head. Reassured for the moment, Paul turned to Alex. "Val and Ursula are here."

"Why did they need help? What did they bring?" Alex asked and

rushed out into the living room to see for himself.

"Don't touch it," Paul warned him.

"You make him sound like a toddler," Val said as she gave Alex a warm hug.

"That's not my doing," Paul claimed. Then he heard Alex gasp as his eyes went wide. "Vaughn, restrain him," he ordered.

Vaughn didn't budge an inch, not that Alex would have minded some light restraining. Mainly he was focused on what was sitting on the dining table. It had to be a dream.

"What is that beautiful monstrosity?" Alex said in awe of it.

"Pumpkin party pie. The bakery on Plume Road makes them for Thanksgiving. They always sell out. We're lucky we got one," Ursula said from the couch where she was sitting sideways with her leg up and ankle still wrapped up to stabilize it. She got injured on a changing of the leaves hike.

"It takes two people to carry it," Val said.

"I believe you, and I think that table might tip over," Vaughn said.

"I heard of these pies," Alex said. "But I thought they were just an urban legend. That pie is my wet dream."

"Eew," Val said.

"You stay away from that pie," Paul ordered him in his sternest voice yet.

"How come you didn't have Carlos make the pie?" Vaughn wondered while they hung around waiting for Paul to issue orders.

"He can't make everything. Any fool can make a halfway decent pumpkin pie. I don't want him wasting his time on that."

Alex objected immediately. "Hey, pumpkin pie is an awesome thing. Show some respect," he demanded.

"He has no respect for sweets in general. That's why we're having these savory, parmesan cookies," Carlos said as he came out of the kitchen and pointed to the coffee table where the cookies were set up on a wire rack to cool. They were probably out there because there was no free counter space in that tiny kitchen.

"Savory cookies aren't cookies they are an abomination. Actually these are really good," Alex said as he popped one in his mouth.

"Are you eating them? Stop that. They're for later when you all start complaining that dinner is late and I need to shut you up," Paul told him and shooed him away from there.

"Don't assume dinner is going to be late," Carlos said and gave Paul a light shove for not having faith in him. "If dinner is late, it will be because your oven is insane. That thing is from the Stone Age."

"Wrong. Thanksgiving dinner is always late. No one since the founding of this great nation has ever served Thanksgiving dinner on time," Paul claimed while Alex hoped he was wrong about that.

"You said to come early so we could help. What do you want us to do?" Alex asked hoping to speed up dinner preparations.

"I didn't mean you," Paul told him dismissively.

"I have two hands." Alex raised his hands as proof. He looked around for something to do. "I can set the table," he said seeing the stack of plates sitting on the table. Then he counted them. "Who else are you waiting for?"

"Zack, but he hasn't even confirmed he's coming." Paul made a sour face. Zack was in bad shape since he caught his ex cheating on him and they broke up.

Vaughn pointed out the obvious. "Maybe he isn't coming."

Paul wasn't accepting that possibility. "He better if he knows what's good for him. And I mean that. It's not good for him to be alone at a time like this. That bastard Brad. I could kill him."

"Zack should have known better," Vaughn said.

"Look how judgmental he is. It's no wonder I hate him," Alex snapped and glared at him. Vaughn looked a little taken aback and Alex regretted his words right away. Still a little raw from his own recent breakup, he felt for Zack and couldn't help taking his side.

"Hate is a little strong, isn't it?" Ursula said from the couch while Val handed her a bottle of water.

"Maybe I'm just hungry," Alex said. He didn't want to get into a conversation about exes. And he didn't really hate Vaughn.

Vaughn shook his head while his blue eyes remained fixed on Alex disapprovingly. "You have the emotional depth of a napkin," he said and pointed his thumb at a stack of turkey themed napkins Paul brought over.

"I'll need those when I set the table," Alex said and grabbed them from him.

"Do you know which side all the utensils are supposed to go on?" Paul asked him.

"You mean you want it by the book?" Alex asked. Not that he should have been surprised since Paul was so strict.

Paul confirmed it. "Yes, I want it by the book. This is a special occasion, a holiday meal my boyfriend is making after working all day!"

"OK. OK. I'll look it up," Alex said and whipped out his phone so he could look up how to properly set a table.

"What can I do?" Vaughn asked.

"Oh God, another useless one," Paul lamented and Alex laughed. "You can get on the horn and track down Zack. I've been texting him to make sure he's coming. The poor dummy is hellishly depressed. He needs to be here but he isn't answering. Text him. Call him. Then if he doesn't answer, text and call everyone he knows."

As expected, Vaughn didn't get a reply from Zack and he didn't answer when he called. "If you want me to get in touch with anyone else, I'll need some numbers," Vaughn said.

"I know Zack better than he does. I should be calling people," Alex said. "Useless Vaughn can set the table."

"Don't call me that," Vaughn said through gritted teeth as Alex shoved the stack of napkins at him.

"Settle it amongst yourselves," Paul told them, washing his hands of them as he went to join Carlos in the kitchen.

"You two are like oil and water. What is with you guys?" Val asked Alex and nodded toward Vaughn, who was meticulously setting the table according to instructions he found online.

"You know Vaughn is the editor of the paper. Well, newspaper nerd kicked me off," Alex told her while his fingers were busy texting.

"You couldn't meet a single deadline," Vaughn said over his shoulder.

"I came close. And in the History of the Americas class, you said my answers on the Spanish Conquest were juvenile," Alex said and jabbed a finger in his direction.

"They were."

"See. He's always picking on me," Alex said.

"No one wants to hear your list of grievances," Vaughn claimed.

"She does." Alex pointed at Val.

She shook her head. "I'm over it, and I'm sorry I asked," she said and went to sit with Ursula's injured ankle in her lap.

Alex checked for replies to his flurry of texts. He frowned at what he saw there and then went into the kitchen to report to Paul.

"No luck. Still no answer from Zack, and no one knows where he's holed up. I don't have his sister's number and she's not checking her email, I guess. I don't know his new roommates. You have their numbers or anything?" he asked Paul, who was looking over Carlos's shoulder at what he was doing, or possibly just copping a feel.

"No." Paul looked at Carlos. After he shook his head, they all went back out into the living room to pool their information.

No one had their roommates' numbers so Paul moved on. "OK then. His sister's number, who has it?" he demanded.

More head shakes.

"I think we have to go out into the field and do some legwork," Paul decided.

"You mean look for Zack? You think it's that serious?" Val asked.

Paul sighed. "I don't know until I hear from him."

"For all we know he might even be home and not answering," Vaughn pointed out.

"He said he definitely wasn't staying at his apartment," Paul told him. "His roommates are having Thanksgiving dinner, some kind of crazy, blind potluck thing. No one knows what anyone else is bringing. He wanted no part of it, and I don't blame him. Sounds like a recipe for disaster."

"Maybe he changed his mind," Alex suggested.

"Fine, we can start there then. Go and see if he's home. If not, talk to his roommates, see what they know. Then we find his sister or get her number, either way talk to her," Paul said.

"Who is supposed to do all this?" Vaughn asked.

"You two go, you're useless anyway," Paul told him and Alex.

"Together?" Alex said and looked at Vaughn skeptically.

"No. Bad idea," Vaughn said, so at least they agreed on that.

"They'll fight like cats and dogs," Val said since she had just witnessed that very thing. "Ursula is out of commission. Vaughn and I can go."

"And leave the pie pervert here alone with the pie?" Ursula said from the couch. "In my condition, I won't be able to do anything to stop him."

Val turned to Alex. "That pie better still be a virgin when I come back," she warned him.

"I'm not a pie pervert. I only want to eat it." Then he added, "In a completely nonsexual way."

Val was ready to grab her jacket and go when Paul stopped her. "You can't go. I don't want to see a couple split up on Thanksgiving. Those two will just have to suck it up," he said and motioned toward Alex and Vaughn dismissively.

"But me and Vaughn are a bad combo," Alex whined.

"And that right there is the only thing we have ever agreed on," Vaughn said.

Paul didn't want to hear it. "Quit your bitching. You two are the most expendable. You're going and that's that."

"You could have lied and said it was because of my superior sleuthing skills," Alex said as he pulled on his jacket.

"I can't sell that lie. Get moving already. And bring Zack here dead or alive, whatever it takes. Use of force is authorized," Paul said.

When use of force was mentioned Vaughn eyed Alex doubtfully. In response Alex flexed his arm. Vaughn shrugged like he wasn't impressed, but the corners of his mouth did turn up just a tiny bit.

"Is anything really going to get accomplished? Aren't you two just going to fight and argue the whole time?" Val asked as she walked them to the door.

"We'll split up. We can cover more ground that way," Vaughn said.

"Carlos says dinner should be ready around nine," Paul yelled from

the kitchen door. "Good luck, you guys."

Chapter 2

As he and Vaughn stepped out in front of Paul's apartment building, Alex couldn't believe they were out here again so soon. "We just got here and Paul kicks us out."

"It's better than waiting for dinner and listening to Paul call us useless. Now let's split up. I'll take..." Vaughn started to say, but Alex couldn't let him have first choice.

"Dibs on the potluck. I want to see what crazy stuff they have. I bet they'll just end up with bags of chips and stacks of napkins. That leaves you to track down Zack's sister at the Hungry Youth kitchen. She is in charge of serving Thanksgiving dinner over there," Alex informed him.

"I know. We wrote an article about it."

"Good for you, but that doesn't make up for that other article you wrote," Alex reminded him. "I bet Ellen is still mad about that."

"I guess I'll find out," Vaughn told him as Alex went off toward Zack's place.

After a few steps, Alex noticed that Vaughn was right behind him. "I thought I ditched you. Why are you following me?"

"I'm not. I'm going to go see Zack's sister at the soup kitchen, and it's this way," Vaughn said and pointed down the street.

Alex stopped and reconsidered their plan. "Now that I think about it, you are the wrong guy to talk to Ellen. There is no way she is going to forgive and forget that you wrote that horrible article."

"That article was well researched and accurate," Vaughn said.

"It was heartless. You attacked a charity with your petty penny-pinching. Ellen's beloved charity. It's like you kicked her dog."

"Fine. Then I'll take the potluck," Vaughn had the nerve to say.

"Over my dead body," Alex said decisively and blocked his way.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Vaughn asked when Alex nixed every plan of action he had.

Alex shrugged. "I guess you can come along to the potluck with me."

"The plan was for us to split up," Vaughn complained, but when Alex started walking, he walked beside him.

"As you can see that plan isn't working out. Zack's apartment is right on the way. We stop by there then we go to see Ellen, and hope she doesn't stomp you to death."

Zack had been living with Brad before they split up. He moved to his new place only a few weeks ago. In that time, Alex hadn't visited Zack's new apartment. The building was boxy and gray, no charm at all. When he and Vaughn got on the elevator, Alex got a sense of deja

vu.

He stared at Vaughn until he got his attention. "Running into you on elevators is starting to be a thing."

"No, it's not. We're going to the same place, together."

When they arrived on the seventh floor, they could pick out Zack's apartment right away. The door was ajar and there was a lot of noise coming from inside the place. Vaughn pushed the door open and said hello. A few people waved but no one paid much attention to them otherwise.

They went in and had a look around. The living room was packed with people milling around with plates and drinks in their hands. There was a table loaded down with food, and just like Alex predicted, bags of chips were well represented. Vaughn and Alex tried to pick out Zack's roommates in this crowd.

One of the roommates spotted them before they spotted him. "This is a potluck. Didn't you guys bring anything?" he asked, frowning at them when he saw that they were empty-handed.

"We aren't here for dinner. We're looking for Zack. Is he here?" Vaughn told him.

"No. He bailed," the guy said.

"Do you know where he went?" Alex asked him.

"No idea." He then called over another roommate, but she didn't know anything either. None of the other guests had any clues to give them. Zack hadn't been living with these guys for long, so it wasn't surprising they didn't know anything, but it did make Alex feel down.

Vaughn noticed his mood. "This is only our first stop. I'm sure his sister will know something," he said to reassure him. That was unexpectedly nice of him, and it made Alex smile.

Feeling a little better, Alex went over to the table with the food. Without showing much interest in what was on display there, Vaughn followed him. There was no turkey anywhere in sight. Alex saw a lasagna pan that had been wiped out, no survivors. A few other serving dishes and aluminum pans were almost empty. Then there were random bags of bread and even a jar of peanut butter.

"Mmm. Nothing says Thanksgiving like some chunky peanut butter. I'm taking a picture of this to send to Paul." After a few seconds Alex laughed. "He just asked me if that's a picture of the inside of a dumpster. He's so mean."

"I see a girl that might know Zack," Vaughn said and walked away to talk to her.

Their conversation didn't leave him in suspense for long. After a minute, Alex watched the girl shake her head. As he waited for Vaughn and checked out everything that had been dumped on the table, Alex noticed a guy staring at him. If he remembered right, he

wasn't a roommate. He was someone's cousin or something. Alex thought the guy might be about to hit on him, but that wasn't it at all.

"Do you guys even celebrate Thanksgiving?" he asked Alex.

"Us guys?" Alex asked and looked around just as Vaughn came up to stand behind him and glower at the guy and everything else in sight.

"Don't you have some kind of Chinese Thanksgiving like that Chinese New Year?" the guy asked, and he didn't seem to be joking.

Alex just stared at him speechless for a minute, then he turned to Vaughn. "Should I answer him or just hit him?"

"The second thing," Vaughn said, but when Alex drew his hand back for a hit upside the head, Vaughn grabbed his arm. "We don't have time for that. Let's go."

"And leave him in ignorance?" Alex said as Vaughn pulled him along.

"We don't have the kind of time it would take to educate the likes of him."

Grudgingly Alex let Vaughn drag him out of there. Then he did more than just let him. He enjoyed the feel of his hand on his upper arm, and he was sorry when Vaughn let go. In the elevator he made sure to stand close to him.

Vaughn didn't say anything about that or move away. That wasn't typical of him. Alex wondered if he might be too distracted to even notice him. While Vaughn stared straight ahead, Alex nudged him. That was a bad habit he had. Cole had told him as much. "You have to be the center of attention. That's just going to make people hate you."

Remembering his words made Alex sober up and step away from Vaughn to give him some space. That's when Vaughn turned to him. Their eyes met and Vaughn opened his mouth like he was about to say something.

Alex waited but no words came. Instead, Vaughn leaned forward and gazed deep into his eyes. Alex did the same. This was the first time he really looked at them. They weren't just blue. They had a touch of green to them and they were so intense. Alex might have been knocked back by that look if Vaughn didn't take hold of his shoulders.

Unconsciously Alex parted his lips maybe in invitation, maybe because be wanted to say something. He would never know because that was when Vaughn kissed him and blew away every thought from his mind. The kiss was so out of the blue, but Alex didn't let the shock of it keep him from kissing him back.

He didn't care what was happening or why. He abandoned himself to the pure feeling of bliss as their lips glided, their tongues danced and Alex moaned into Vaughn's mouth. His arms slipped around Vaughn's waist, and Vaughn's moved to lock behind Alex's back. The kiss seemed endless, but of course it wasn't. The elevator stopped on the

second floor and ruined the moment.

The two of them pulled apart and breathed hard as the elevator doors opened. Two older ladies got on and Alex and Vaughn stared at the floor guiltily like two boys who had been caught red-handed. Alex's heart was hammering away. He put his hand to his chest to feel it, almost like he needed proof that Vaughn McRae had really kissed him.

Chapter 3

When they stepped outside Zack's building, Vaughn didn't put his jacket on right away. He could feel the cool breeze hit him, but it chilled only his skin. His body remained overheated, still buzzing from that kiss, from the heat and hardness of Alex's body pressed against him.

Vaughn wasn't used to behaving the way he just did. Grabbing a guy and kissing him wasn't his style. He wasn't impulsive. Usually he was a lot more reserved and cautious when it came to hitting on anyone. He didn't know what got into him.

Not being used to acting like this, he had no defenses. The feel of Alex in that incredibly tight embrace was too fresh, too real. Vaughn experienced a pull toward him, like gravity had shifted. The slightest hint from Alex would send him tumbling into his arms. That's why he kept his eyes averted from him as they stood on the sidewalk.

Confused by what he had done, he stared up and down the street so he wouldn't have to face Alex. Vaughn could feel his eyes on him, questioning him silently. Waiting for him to speak, he was afraid to move, like prey hoping not to be noticed by its natural predator.

"That wasn't the Vaughn I know. What got into you?" Alex asked and stared at him like he was a puzzle with a piece that just wouldn't fit.

"Just a weird impulse, sorry about that," Vaughn said trying to dismiss the feeling that drove him to grab Alex and kiss him. It wasn't that easy to put what he did behind him. Their kiss, the collision of their bodies and the way Alex responded still made his body pulse like his heart had grown too big for his chest.

The questioning look in Alex's eyes only made the feeling worse. Why did his eyes have to be so dark? Vaughn couldn't tell if they were brown or black. He wanted to stare at them until he figured it out, no matter how long it took.

In confusion Vaughn turned away and looked up the street. They were standing in front of Zack's building where drafts of wind would ruffle their clothes now and then. The evening was pushing toward night, the air getting colder.

"Paul told us not to come back without Zack, and he won't let us eat. Not that there was anything good at that potluck, but I'm going to keel over from starvation." Alex slumped over and pretended to stagger.

"Did you want to call it a night?" Vaughn asked. "I can go on by myself."

Alex straightened from his slump immediately. "No way. I don't abandon friends in need."

"OK, we keep looking, but we should split up now. We wasted

enough time already. I can go see Ellen by myself," Vaughn decided as he finally put his jacket on. If he stayed around Alex, he didn't know what he might do.

Alex wasn't letting him go off on his own though. "Like she's going to tell you anything. She hates you, remember?"

He had a point but Vaughn still tried to deny it. "We had a difference of opinion. That's all. I'm sure it's all water under the bridge."

"You wrote that the Hungry Youth charity wasted money instead of spending it on the homeless youths."

"Youths? Who says that? And that's not what the article said. Did you even read it?" Vaughn asked.

"Yes, I did. You nitpicked at which foods they bought and where they got their books."

"Their spending wasn't optimized. There is no excuse..." Vaughn started to say, but Alex wouldn't let him make his point.

"Their donations dropped right through the floor because of you."

Vaughn gave up. "Fine, we'll both go," he said.

They barely took two steps when they spotted one of Zack's roommates coming up the sidewalk, carrying an aluminum tray.

"Hi. Do you know where Zack might be?" Alex asked her while trying to sneak a peek at what she had in the tray. "And what am I smelling?"

"It's ham with a cherry cola glaze," the roommate told him and Alex nearly fainted. "And you won't find Zack up there." That wasn't new information, but she didn't know that they had already checked the apartment. "Zack passed on the potluck. He's at that Hungry Youth place that his sister runs. He's helping with their Thanksgiving thing. It's down that way." With her hands busy holding the tray, she motioned with her head in the direction of the charity.

"We know where it is. Thanks," Alex said. He looked so happy as they walked away. "We found him," he said and clapped Vaughn on the back.

On the way, he kicked a few dry leaves and generally acted like a kid. Vaughn was happy too. He was more concerned about Zack than he wanted to let on, and obviously Alex was too.

There was a time when Vaughn used to hang out with Zack, but that stopped when he got together with Brad. Vaughn didn't know how to hide his dislike of Brad or how to keep his opinions to himself.

That's why he got into journalism. He wanted to bring the truth out of the shadows and into the light of day. Plenty of people didn't like him because of that.

And because he couldn't keep his mouth shut about his boyfriend, Zack grew distant. They barely said hello for a while there. Even after he and Brad broke up, Zack didn't open up to him. Now that they knew where he was, Vaughn would have his chance to show him he

could be a supportive friend even if he disagreed with his choices.

As Vaughn was vowing to be a better friend, they walked down a few streets and found themselves one block down from the charity for runaways and disadvantaged kids that Ellen ran. It was called Hungry Youth. Underneath the name, the sign read "Feeding bodies and minds." They handed out a lot of books and served a free lunch every day. Tonight they were serving Thanksgiving dinner.

There was a line in front so he and Alex went around to the back. The alley was kind of dank. They passed a dumpster and a few unmarked doors then saw the sign that said Hungry Youth along with information for people delivering donations. They stopped right outside the nondescript metal door. Vaughn stepped up, ready to knock, but Alex blocked the door.

"What now?" Vaughn wanted to know.

"You wait out here. I'll go in and talk to Zack. I don't want you getting into a thing with Ellen."

"I'm not waiting out here," Vaughn said and tried to push past him.

Alex stood his ground. "I want to talk to Zack, not watch Ellen rip your head off."

"What about Zack?" Ellen said from behind them and made them both jump.

She had come around the corner carrying two grocery bags, one in each hand. Vaughn didn't know her well, but he felt a sense of familiarity because she reminded him of Zack. She was blond and skinny just like Zack but about a foot shorter. She might be tiny, but she still managed to put the fear of God into Alex.

"Hi, Ellen. I'm not with him," he said, disavowing Vaughn. Alex even took a step away from him like he was getting out of her line of fire.

"Hi, Ellen. I'm sorry if..." Vaughn started to say but she cut him off curtly.

"What do you want?"

"We're looking for Zack," he said while Ellen looked them up and down.

"Come in here. I have a job for the two of you," she said and led the way inside.

"What?" Alex asked but Ellen ignored him and turned to Vaughn.

"We almost weren't able to pull together a Thanksgiving dinner because of you. You need to make it up to us for that article you wrote."

"Every word was..." Vaughn was ready to defend himself but Alex wouldn't let him.

"Shut up, Vaughn. No one cares. She's giving you a chance to redeem yourself. Get in there," Alex said and pushed him through the door

ahead of him.

"Where's Zack?" Vaughn asked as they went in and he didn't see him among the people working in the kitchen.

"He went to Paul's party," Ellen said. "At first he was just going to mope around alone somewhere. But I told him no way. He told me if he had to make a choice between that weird potluck thing or real food, he picked Paul's party. That's where you'll find him."

"No. Paul is the one who sent us out to hunt him down," Alex told her and his face fell.

"I guess he changed his mind. Try Zack's place then," she said.

"Just came from there," Vaughn told her. "Zack told one of his roommates that he was coming here to volunteer."

"No. I was full up until two of our guys had car trouble. That's why I need you guys to pitch in."

As they looked around the busy and fairly small kitchen, Ellen introduced them to everyone real fast. The oven was going, but a turkey was already being carved up. Big, metal pots were steaming away and people were yelling back and forth. At the serving window, plates were being loaded down with turkey and sides.

The kitchen was hot so they took their jackets off and hung them up with a bunch of others. After coming in from the cold, the heat in there felt good for about half a minute then it was too much. Ellen led them to the sinks. Seeing two pails of dirty dishes next to them, Alex guessed what fate had in store for them and groaned. He then slumped against Vaughn.

The move threw Vaughn off balance in more ways than one. Again he had that feeling that gravity had definitely shifted in his world. His awareness was centered on Alex. As Vaughn put his arm around Alex to steady them both, the contact between them became too much.

Telling himself that he shouldn't feel like this, that this was nothing, didn't help at all. To get himself under control, Vaughn held his breath and waited for the shudder to pass through him. How was Alex doing this to him without even trying?

"Those two guys I told you about will be here soon," Ellen explained. "You're filling in for them until they get here. Wash those pots, pans and anything else sitting over there." Done giving them instructions, she left them to it.

"Of course. It would have to be washing dishes, wouldn't it," Alex complained. He had stepped away from Vaughn, but he was still too aware of Alex like an invisible thread still connected them.

"What did you think we would be doing?" Vaughn asked him while he pushed his shirtsleeves up past his elbows.

Alex had some ideas. "Acting as food tasters. Maybe garnishing a few things with sprigs of parsley."

"Roll up your sleeves before you get them wet," Vaughn ordered him.

Before they started working, Alex took a picture of Vaughn in front of the stack of dirty dishes then pushed his phone at him. "Now you take one of me."

"Why am I doing this?" Vaughn wanted to know.

"It's proof that we aren't useless. I want to show Paul that we're doing stuff." Alex then took a pose in front of the sink with his arms flexed and his jaw set.

Vaughn took the picture, smiled at it then handed the phone back. He caught himself thinking that he should have taken the picture with his own phone, then he could keep it. Alex was making all sorts of stupid thoughts invade his mind.

Alex immediately grew suspicious. "Did you make me look goofy?" Looking at the picture, he didn't see anything wrong with it. He looked at Vaughn sideways then they got down to business.

The water was scalding hot and the pots and pans took a lot of scrubbing to get clean. For all his complaining, Alex wasn't a bad worker. Surprisingly, Vaughn didn't mind that Alex chattered non-stop, maybe because he liked the sound of his voice. It had a pleasant depth and resonance.

As they worked at the sinks, they bumped elbows a lot. Sometimes Alex would push against him deliberately, just to cause trouble. Feeling a little overwhelmed every time they touched made Vaughn wonder why he was so defenseless against him. Thinking back, he realized that this might be the first time he and Alex were spending time alone together. In that way, Alex was a new discovery.

Being next to Alex made Vaughn lose track of time a little bit, but it wasn't long before the two guys who had car trouble arrived and relieved them. While he and Alex were wiping their hands, Ellen came over to talk about Zack. She started by rattling off the names of people they already talked to.

"We already hit all the usual suspects," Alex told her. "Not everyone got back to us, but most of them did and they don't know anything." He showed her his most recent messages. "Who is missing?"

She had to think for a while. "Oh, there is Carlton, this skinny, underaged kid Zack was tutoring in Japanese. They got pretty friendly."

"Underaged?" Alex asked with a raised eyebrow.

"He started college at sixteen."

"He isn't holed up with him somewhere, come on," Vaughn objected.

"I didn't say he was, but he might know where Zack planned to go. Zack was talking to him just yesterday. And you're in luck. Carlton was volunteering for us so I have his number," she said.

"Text him. Find out what he knows," Alex told her. When she didn't

get an answer, he told her to do it again.

"You text him. I have my hands full," she said and gave Alex the number then went off to deal with some kind of fracas in front.

Alex texted that Carlton kid but didn't get a reply. Now they were pestering Ellen once again.

"You can just go by his house and talk to him. Zack was saying how much he envied their big family dinner so Carlton will definitely be eating at home," she told them. "I had to go and pick up Zack from there once. He texted me the address. Here," she said after she was done searching through her texts.

As soon as they stepped outside the door of the kitchen, Alex started questioning Vaughn about what they just found out. "So did Zack lie to Ellen and to his roommate about where he was going, or did he change his mind and...?" Alex trailed off while a frown creased his forehead.

"It might just be a misunderstanding," Vaughn said as he put his jacket on but didn't zip it up. The heat of that kitchen still had him feeling too warm, plus his hands felt like they had been boiled.

"Ellen didn't seem worried," Alex noted.

"Maybe there is no reason to be."

Alex seemed to be thinking that over, then he shook his head. "I don't know. Ellen is a very practical, no-nonsense kind of person, and Zack is the opposite of that. I don't know if she understands what a broken heart can do to someone like him," Alex said, looking troubled. They were still lingering in the alley behind the charity kitchen.

"Don't assume something like that. Just because she isn't all emotional and touchy feely doesn't mean that she doesn't know what it's like to have a broken heart. And Zack is her little brother. She knows him better than we do," Vaughn pointed out.

"That's true. She does know him, so I should take it as a good sign that she isn't worried, right?" Alex said and stared at Vaughn intently.

Seeing that he needed reassurance, Vaughn told him, "It's a good sign. If she isn't freaking out, we shouldn't either."

Alex nodded and smiled. His worry for Zack was so damn endearing, maybe because he seemed so flippant about everything. But obviously, he did care. Maybe that's why Vaughn grabbed his face and kissed him.

The kiss was too sudden. It made Alex whimper and stumble and grab fistfuls of Vaughn's jacket to hang on. Their chests pressed together. Vaughn's fingers pushed through his hair as he moved his hand to grip the back of his head and deepened their kiss. Vaughn couldn't remember ever wanting to kiss someone and never stop, not even to breathe.

But they did stop. Their mouths parted. Vaughn's chest expanded with heavy breathing as Alex clung to him. His eyelids fluttered. Their lips still touching, Vaughn stroked Alex's face as he moaned.

Letting him go wasn't easy, but they had to get going. They walked to the end of the alley together then stopped to consider what they were doing next. But first Alex had to needle him.

"The last time was an impulse, so what was that all about?" Alex asked and pointed back at the alley.

"Just trying to distract you and keep you from worrying," Vaughn claimed.

"And yourself too?" Alex guessed.

"Maybe."

"So are we splitting up now?" Alex asked.

"We should. Since talking to a teenager seems more like your thing, you take this one," Vaughn said and zipped up his jacket.

"What are you going to do? Walk the streets hoping to run into Zack at random?" Alex said.

"I might," Vaughn said stubbornly.

Alex turned to face him and frowned at him. "You're just afraid of me because I got under your skin. You're running away," Alex accused him.

"No one is running away," Vaughn asserted.

"Whatever, but I don't want to traipse through the suburbs by myself. And it's not like I know this kid. We can go together. You can be there to back me up," Alex proposed.

"Together. Fine, but then we split up for good."

"Won't be soon enough," Alex said.

After a few steps, Vaughn noticed that Alex's mood had darkened. "I guess my distraction technique wore off."

"It freaks me out that no one knows where Zack is," Alex said with a sigh. He might be easily distracted, but he was really worried.

"We'll find him," Vaughn reassured him. He put an arm around Alex and pulled him close.

"You're too sweet for words."

"Now you're mocking me?" Vaughn said but he had to suppress a smile.

Walking with his arm around Alex was kind of nice. The air he breathed was sharp with cold, bare branches were stark against the inky sky, but the night didn't feel lonely. It seemed full of tantalizing possibilities with Alex by his side.

Chapter 4

Despite claiming that he couldn't wait for them to split up, Alex was glad that they were sticking together. Maybe he was hoping Vaughn would do something unexpected again. He wanted to kick himself for that. Vaughn wasn't really interested in him. It was just this weird night.

But did Vaughn have to be such a good kisser? The kiss started fast then turned deep and slow, first passionate then tender. Alex could still feel that kiss right down to his toes.

The lingering sparks of pleasure were really unsettling. They could barely tolerate each other. It was a terrible idea to get any closer to Vaughn than this half-accidental bumping of shoulders and grazing of their hands when the sidewalks got crowded by the bus depot.

From the still lively streets of the town at night, they headed to the suburbs. Streets got darker and quieter and dry leaves crunched under their feet loudly. They passed more cars than people. Sometimes they witnessed as cars parked in driveways and whole families spilled out, ready to eat their Thanksgiving dinners. That thought made Alex so hungry.

He stopped under a streetlight to make sure they were going the right way. Vaughn took the opportunity to bring up something Alex let slip earlier.

"When you were talking about Zack being brokenhearted, and that Ellen might not understand, you made it sound like maybe you do," Vaughn said.

Alex made a face and grumbled, but he couldn't deny it. "Kind of. I felt really down after Cole and I broke up. And I was the one who dumped him. It must have been even harder for Zack." The way Alex felt afterward opened his eyes to how hard it was to let go once you give away even the smallest piece of your heart to someone.

"I thought Zack broke up with Brad. Didn't he?" Vaughn asked.

"Not exactly," Alex told him as they moved on. "Zack wanted to give him a second chance, but he needed Brad to promise he wouldn't cheat on him again. Brad said that was too much to ask. That Zack had no right to expect him to give up other guys for him. He made it sound like Zack wasn't good enough all by himself. When Zack told me that, I wanted to punch Brad." Alex only punched the air while picturing Brad's smug face.

"Zack didn't tell me about that. I guess I got the Cliff's Notes version," Vaughn said and looked down at the ground. He obviously didn't like being out of the loop like that.

"That's because you hated Brad at first sight," Alex told him.

"I could tell the guy couldn't be trusted. He was too full of himself. Even with Zack right there, he was checking out other guys," Vaughn said with a shake of his head. "But it's not like I was going to yell 'I told you so' in Zack's face."

"No, but Zack would have heard it even if you didn't say it," Alex told him as gently as he could. "It's hard to talk about a breakup and not feel ashamed and like a failure."

"You felt that way?" Vaughn seemed genuinely surprised.

"Yes. Even if the breakup is the right decision, it's not exactly a victory. You want forever and you end up trying to glue your shattered heart back together."

"Sorry," Vaughn said then he pointed at the house down the block. It was a big, two story house with evergreen bushes lining the path to the front door. They had just stepped on that path when Alex got a call from Val asking for an update.

"We talked to Ellen and got a lead, maybe," he told her. "And we helped out with the Thanksgiving dinner for the youths."

"Youths? And stop bragging. You almost dropped a pan on my foot," Vaughn complained.

"Why do I hear Vaughn grumbling in the background?" Val asked.

"Because that's all he does. He's a non stop grumbling machine," Alex said.

"I mean why is he there? You were supposed to split up," Val reminded him.

"He's helpless without me," Alex claimed and gave Vaughn a big grin.

"Liar," Vaughn said.

"So what's the lead?" she asked.

"We're on our way to see a guy Zack was tutoring. I guess you guys haven't heard anything," Alex said since she wouldn't be asking him for news if they did.

"Nothing so far, so we're wishing you guys good luck," she said. Then she hung up before he could ask her about dinner.

"Come on," Vaughn told him and pulled him along to the front door.

The doorbell played a tune and a middle-aged man with a mustache opened the door. He looked from Vaughn to Alex.

"Happy Thanksgiving, sorry to bother you. We'd like to speak to Carlton. We're friends with Zack, his Japanese tutor. We need Carlton's help finding him," Vaughn rattled off, sounding more like a cop than a concerned friend.

The guy with the mustache looked confused but then he called Carlton's name. After a minute, a skinny teen in an oversized, orange and green sweater and beige slacks came to the front door. His eyes were a very pale blue, his dark hair was slicked to the side and he

looked bored.

"Carlton, right? We're Zack's friends. I'm Vaughn. This is Alex. Do you know where Zack might be?" Vaughn asked him.

"You came all the way here to ask me that?" Carlton said.

"We are worried about him," Vaughn said.

"And we wouldn't have to come all the way here if you answered my texts." Alex held up his phone with the series of unanswered texts stacked up on top of each other.

"I don't look at texts from strangers," Carlton said as he eyed Alex through half-closed eyes.

"Like it's so hard to read a text," Alex rebuked him.

"You don't know what kind of weird texts I get from weird guys," Carlton said and looked him up and down.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not weird," Alex said defensively. "And Zack's sister, Ellen, texted you too."

"She did? My phone is off. House rule on Thanksgiving night. Turkey Day is a deadly serious occasion over here," Carlton explained and pointed behind him into the house.

"You just said you didn't answer my texts because you thought I was a pervert, but it's really because your phone is off," Alex concluded.

"It's both," Carlton said just as a lady called him to take out the garbage from the kitchen. He walked outside then over to a side door and the same lady handed him a white bag full of trash. Since the side door was left open, Alex could see inside. It was a door to the kitchen, and it was bustling with activity in there. He went over to peer in and see what was cooking.

"What are you doing?" Vaughn tried to stop him by grabbing the back of his jacket, but Alex just kept going, pulling Vaughn along with him.

"Oh my God, it smells amazing," Alex practically moaned as they got close, and the rich, savory smell of cooking hit him as it wafted out of the open door.

Carlton dumped the bag of garbage in the trashcan and then pushed the door wider to let Alex have a better look inside the kitchen. "My mom and my uncle are cooking. Everyone else is assisting. I'm only good for garbage duty. We have a tofurkey and a turducken and every kind of side dish known to man," he bragged. He was a cruel child.

"I find turducken disturbing. It's like the Frankenstein monster of turkeys," Alex said.

"So you wouldn't eat it?" Vaughn asked, doubtfully.

Alex glared at him indignantly. "I didn't say that. Did you hear me say that? No."

"And tofurkey?" Vaughn questioned him.

Alex thought about it. "I guess it's an evil necessity, but the thought

of eating it makes me want to cry."

"No one is asking you to eat it," Carlton told him and closed the kitchen door. "The tofurkey is for me, two of my cousins and one aunt."

"Good. We're not here to eat," Vaughn said heartlessly.

"Yeah, we came to pick your brain," Alex told Carlton, but eyed the closed kitchen door wistfully.

Seeing that he was distracted, Vaughn took over. "We want to know if you can think of where Zack might have gone or if you can think of anyone else who might be able to tell us where he went."

"No one else knows or we wouldn't be asking you," Alex added.

Carlton thought about it. "Well, I don't know if he would go there, but he talked a lot about this ex. That's the first place I'd check."

"Brad? Don't even joke about that," Vaughn told him.

"OK. Then I won't," Carlton said with a shrug, like he was just jerking their chains. He was so helpful. "But Zack wouldn't shut up about that guy. When we went to the museum to see the exhibit of the Japanese woodblock prints, Zack kept going on and on about what a terrible guy his ex was. How he played mind games with him and tried to convince him he was crazy when he saw all these signs that he was cheating on him. And when Zack caught him in the act, his ex turned around and blamed him for it. Pitiful stuff like that. Zack told me to watch out for guys like him. I guess he was kind of giving me love advice. He told me to look for a really nice guy and then never let him go no mater what." Carlton rolled his eyes.

"That's surprisingly sensible coming from Zack," Vaughn said.

Alex was more surprised by the nature of his conversations with Carlton. "Zack was giving you love advice? What kind of tutor was he exactly?"

"There was nothing explicit about his advice just lovey-dovey crap. Barf," Carlton said.

"Oh, you'll come to appreciate the lovey-dovey crap after a couple of jerks," Alex predicted.

Carlton only shrugged his skinny shoulders. He might have to learn the hard way, like Alex did.

"So why did you say Zack might be with Brad if he warned you away from guys like him?" Vaughn asked.

"Because he's obviously obsessed with him," Carlton said.

Neither one of them wanted to believe that, but it was all they got from Carlton before they left.

"Where to now?" Vaughn asked since they hadn't gotten any clues from Carlton, not any they wanted to believe anyway.

They both got on their phones. The only new texts they had were from people checking in to ask about Zack, not from anyone who had

any info for them. Now they were at loose ends and slowly making their way through the suburb. Vaughn was looking off into the distance, lost in thought while Alex tried not to stare at him.

As they walked back the way they came, Alex couldn't get what Carlton said out of his mind. "What if Zack is with Brad, just like that evil spawn said?" Alex proposed uneasily.

Vaughn made a disgusted noise. "Don't even say that," he told Alex then he gave up on denial and just cursed. "Fuck. Where do we find him?"

"Brad? Don't know. I never hung out with that creep. I'll see if anyone has any info on him," Alex said and started texting.

Vaughn did the same, but it turned out that no one they knew wanted anything to do with Brad. That was a good choice, but it wasn't helpful to Vaughn and Alex at the moment. Between the two of them they ended up with only one clue. It came from Paul, who called Alex back instead of texting.

The first thing Alex said to him wasn't about Brad. "We were just at this house looking for clues and they have a turducken. Why don't we have a turducken?"

"Are you talking to me about food? Don't even think of spoiling your dinner," Paul warned him.

"OK, Dad," Alex told him.

"Carlos is working his fingers to the bone putting a dinner on the table over here. You have even one bite of anything and I'll murder you," Paul threatened.

"Now you sound more like my mom. I miss that scary lady," Alex said then he asked him about finding Brad.

"So where can we find Brad?" Vaughn asked Alex after he hung up.

"Paul says that this guy Wayne knows him. Brad and Zack met through him."

"Then this guy Wayne has a lot to answer for. Who is he?" Vaughn said looking kind of grim. Obviously the idea that Zack might be with Brad wasn't sitting well with him.

"Guy who works at Joker's," Alex said and adjusted their course through the suburb so they would come out closer to the bar. "And there is good news about dinner. It's going to be late. There was a stuffing snafu and that crappy, old oven of Paul's is acting up."

"Then we might make it back in time," Vaughn said.

They walked side by side on a narrow sidewalk past houses with glowing windows. The trees on the other side were huge, with canopies still full of yellow leaves. Their color was so bright it stood out even in the darkness of the evening.

"Where is your family for Thanksgiving anyway?" Vaughn asked as

they passed by a front yard that had been turned into a parking lot. They obviously had a full house.

"Everyone abandoned me and went to have Thanksgiving with my grandma and step-granddad in Canada," Alex said in his most self-pitying tone.

"A Canadian Thanksgiving? That seems wrong."

"Grandma exported it when she went to live up there with her second husband," Alex told him. Even without being there, he could hear his mom and his grandmother arguing about every single dish they made while re-seasoning things behind each other's backs. "And why aren't you with them?" Vaughn asked.

"No passport. Grandma just got married over the summer, and I didn't think to get one. And don't say that's typical of me," Alex said then turned his question around on him. "What about your family?"

"Thanksgiving with my homophobic dad and brothers – out of the question. I would usually go to my mom's, but this year it's a stepfamily Thanksgiving at a step-aunt's place. It's a full house and I don't even know half of those people, so I skipped it." Vaughn shrugged, but Alex knew it had to be hard on him.

"At least you have me," Alex said. He was joking. He knew his company wouldn't really console him, but Vaughn gave him a funny look then he smiled. So maybe he did console him after all.

Chapter 5

Vaughn was glad that they still had a lead to follow and that they didn't have to give up the search. This time he didn't even mention that they should go their own way. It didn't make sense to him any more. The way he felt about it right now, he could walk the night streets forever just talking to Alex and maybe stopping occasionally to kiss him.

Once that idea occurred to him, there was no going back. Vaughn's chest grew tight at the thought and he sneaked a glance at Alex. At the sight of him, Vaughn had to fight for his next breath. Alex biting his lower lip and staring into the night was an irresistible sight. Vaughn had to kiss him right now. For that reason, he looked for somewhere with a little more privacy than a sidewalk in the middle of a suburb.

Luck was on his side. They were passing by an empty lot. Trees were spaced out around the edge as if a house had been standing there once but it got demolished. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Vaughn grabbed Alex by the hand and pulled him off the sidewalk and under one of the trees on the empty lot.

He backed Alex against the tree trunk then immediately closed the distance between them. His hands on Alex's hips, Vaughn could feel the heat of Alex's body as he looked at him hard. Taking a measured breath, Alex reached behind him and linked his arms behind his back. Prisoner to his eyes, locked in his arms, Vaughn felt like time stopped and the rest of the world ceased to exist.

Alex's mouth was barely an inch from his own, soft, waiting. Then he angled his face toward him and their lips brushed with a shock of pleasure. Turning his head a little, Vaughn let his lips graze Alex's again, prolonging the anticipation with the feathery touch.

In the next instant their mouths melded together. Alex's crotch brushed against Vaughn's and he thought he would lose his mind. His whole body tingled with desire as his heart raced out of control.

Grinding into him, kissing him with abandon, Vaughn forgot all about where they were and where they were going. All he knew was this incredible feeling of Alex in his arms. He felt the muscles of his legs as he braced against the tree trunk. Alex's arms tightened around him and pulled him in even closer. With Vaughn flush against him, Alex's hands skimmed down his back and groped his ass.

During all that groping, one of Alex's hands found its way to the front of his jeans. One squeeze and Vaughn went still, like he had been captured. As his own hand slid down Alex's chest and abs, reaching for his cock, he stopped breathing.

Pushing him harder against the tree, he could feel Alex pulling him down and he was letting him. Alex's hand disappeared down the front of his jeans. Then his cold hands hit Vaughn's overheated skin and he jumped.

"Your hands are cold," Vaughn told him breathlessly.

"My mouth is warm," Alex told him and kissed the corner of his mouth then full on the lips to show him.

After hearing that, Vaughn almost gave in. But then he panted "sorry" and pulled away. Before he explained himself, he had to take a few deep breaths first. "In this neighborhood, we would get arrested so fast."

Alex's expression turned almost angry. "I notice you always have some half-assed excuse."

"Do I need an excuse?" Vaughn said as he nuzzled him playfully. While Alex rubbed his back, Vaughn leaned into his neck and inhaled his scent and his warmth.

"Too bad you're so uptight. I've never done it outdoors," Alex complained.

"It's uptight not to want to go to jail?" Vaughn mumbled into his collar, his breath tickling Alex's skin. "We should be going anyway."

"Spoilsport. You'll need to make that up to me," Alex told him as they stumbled back to the sidewalk.

"I like your single-minded determination."

Alex turned his eyes to him. "Aha. You like me."

"You just hear whatever you want," Vaughn said with a shake of his head.

"No. I'm hearing what's in your heart," Alex whispered, but then he immediately turned shy and wouldn't meet Vaughn's eyes.

As they stood in the middle of the sidewalk for a brief moment, Alex looked up at the sky and Vaughn followed his gaze. There was no trace of daylight left and the sky was filled with stars. Once they started moving again, Vaughn got turned around for a minute, not sure if they were going the right way. That's what Alex did to him. In one night, he had turned his world upside down.

Joker's bar had a whole card-playing motif. No gambling went on in there so it was kind of a waste. Looking in through the windows, Vaughn saw that the bar wasn't exactly packed since a lot of people were having Thanksgiving dinner with families, not drinking it up. But there was a decent number of people inside, more than Vaughn expected. That might have been because a sign proclaimed that they were serving the "fattest turkey sandwiches you've ever seen". Vaughn wasn't surprised to hear Alex whimper as he laid eyes on the sign.

As soon as they walked in, he zeroed in on the real thing. "I could

inhale one of those in the blink of an eye," Alex boasted seeing two of the sandwiches pass by on a tray along with two foamy mugs of beer.

"Did you forget why we're here?" Vaughn told him as they took their jackets off and he had a look around. He noticed that unusual decks of cards were displayed in see-through cases on the walls, but he saw no familiar faces. He had kind of been hoping that they would find Zack here.

"Wayne is not behind the bar," Alex said after a quick look that way.

"You know him?" Vaughn asked.

"Lots of people do. He is a bartender after all," Alex said.

"I don't hang out in bars that much," Vaughn said.

"Don't sound so superior about it. You're fun impaired. OK. I'll go find Wayne and shake him down. You get us beers," Alex told him.

"Now I'm buying you beer?"

"Yes. I'm thirsty. Now go," Alex ordered him and pushed him in the direction of the bar.

While getting those beers, Vaughn asked about Wayne and Zack, but had no luck. It wasn't long before Alex joined him again. Before he made his report on Wayne, Alex grabbed a mug of beer out of Vaughn's hand and took a couple of swallows. "I got nothing," he said after a satisfied sigh. "Wayne isn't here. No one I talked to knows where to find him."

"The bartender said that he wasn't working tonight," Vaughn said as he watched Alex wipe beer foam off his upper lip.

"Let's get off our feet, drink these then we can see if anyone knows where he is. And we can ask about Zack at the same time," Alex said and led the way to a table that just opened up.

As those fat, turkey sandwiches were carried around on trays, Alex followed them with his eyes. Vaughn reminded him that Paul would kill them if they ordered them. While Alex was drooling over the sandwiches, Vaughn spotted a familiar face.

A girl he kind of knew from school was working as a waitress, and he waved her over. She was carrying around a tray with those coveted sandwiches and a couple of beer bottles. Vaughn tried to remember her name but failed. After delivering the order, she came over. She seemed to recognize both him and Alex, but she didn't look happy to see them.

"Tell me you two aren't dating," she said to them, sounding horrified.

"Don't be crazy," Alex said before Vaughn could answer.

Vaughn wanted to be the first one to deny it. He knew it would hurt to hear it from Alex, and it did.

"Oh, OK," she said with a sigh of relief. "It looked really bad for a minute there. Your whole messed up relationship flashed before my eyes. First there was beer-fueled sex, then constant fighting, an ugly

breakup, nonstop bitching about the ex, hate sex, then more bitching."

"Have you seen Zack?" Vaughn asked to cut through her hallucination of their future as a couple.

"He comes here to hang out with Wayne sometimes, but he isn't here." She didn't know anything else.

It was a long shot anyway. She did give them Wayne's number. It turned out he was at a party and not making much sense in the only text he sent in reply to several Alex sent him. When Alex tried to call him, he didn't even answer. Must be having too good a time. Good thing the waitress knew where that party was.

"Charlotte's party. I'll give you the address," she said.

"Don't look so down," Vaughn told Alex as they went out into the cold night.

"We still have no idea where Zack is. I hope to hell he isn't with Brad. That's a huge step back. Or is it better than being alone on Thanksgiving. I don't even know any more." It was like being out on the dark and lonely streets made Alex question himself.

"At least we know where this Wayne is now."

"Yeah. Let's see if we can squeeze any info out of him in person."

As they walked, Alex brought up something the waitress had mentioned. "I heard hate sex is supposed to be really good."

Vaughn denied it immediately. "What? No way."

"You've had it?" Alex asked as his imagination ran wild.

Vaughn grimaced at the idea. "No and I don't want to."

"That's because you're uptight. So what's the best sex you ever had?" Alex challenged him.

"Haven't had it yet," Vaughn stated simply.

"You haven't had sex?" Alex was shocked.

"No, you idiot. I haven't had the best yet."

"You came close, but you passed up the chance because you were scared of getting arrested," Alex told him with a smirk.

Vaughn only groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was think back and remember that near miss. He didn't know how close he came to succumbing to Alex. Too close. Remembering his recklessness, Vaughn wanted to run away from everything Alex made him feel.

But at the same time it seemed unthinkable not to stay by his side. Maybe it was the season, needing to feel close to someone on a cold night, feel the intimate warmth of another body. But not any body. It had to be Alex.

Soon they arrived at the building where the party was. Stepping into the elevator, Alex eyed Vaughn. "Are you going to tell me it's a coincidence that we find ourselves in another elevator?"

"Yes, I am. But feel free to take the stairs," Vaughn told him without turning to face him. He couldn't stay aloof though as he felt Alex sidle close to him.

His breath caught in his throat as Alex stepped against him and spoke with a challenge in his voice. "I know you want to."

"You're that sure of yourself?" Vaughn said, pretending that he wasn't a hundred percent right.

"I'm sure of you," Alex said and stepped away.

Despite his better judgment, Vaughn turned to look at him. He knew it was a bad idea, but he still closed the distance between them until he made contact. As if his body moved on its own, he didn't stop until Alex was trapped between him and the wall of the elevator.

Each breath he took was loud in his ears, drowning out the cacophony of objections that crowded his mind. Alex's eyes drew him in. The closer they got, the more Vaughn looked into them, the more beautiful his eyes became.

Suddenly claustrophobic, Vaughn found there wasn't enough air to breathe. There was no escape only Alex with his fingertips trailing down his arms, stopping to grab his hands and pull him close against him. Vaughn's hands went to his waist, his face tilted to the side ready for their lips to meet. He looked into Alex's eyes as long as he could then they fell closed, and his lips brushed over Vaughn's while his tongue sneaked inside.

In no time the kiss was heating up, going from soft and yearning to fiery as Vaughn's repressed passion took over. While Alex's fingers clawed over his back, Vaughn's hands moved from rubbing his back to groping his ass. God knows how far he would have gone if the elevator didn't stop.

But even when the elevator doors opened, Vaughn didn't let him go. Pulling back only a little, Vaughn held him and stared at him. As Alex eyed him with an amused and questioning look, Vaughn didn't want to find him disarming or attractive or irresistible. He wanted to run from his feelings, not wallow in them clutching Alex like his life depended on it. Vaughn stayed like that even as the doors closed again, cutting off his escape.

It was Alex who snapped him out of it. "If you aren't careful, you'll end up with an elevator fetish. Unless you already have one," he said with a smirk.

"Move it or we'll end up on the wrong floor," Vaughn told him gruffly as he got the doors to open again.

"Was that another impulse?" Alex asked.

"Just relieving some tension," Vaughn said.

"Have any left?"

"Plenty," Vaughn told him as he wondered what he might do the next

time they were alone. He had no idea where this might lead. He had never been so afraid of something while he rushed headlong into it.

Chapter 6

As Vaughn rushed him off the elevator, Alex just couldn't stop smiling to himself. Vaughn was a revelation – the way he kissed, the way he held him and gazed at him. Alex felt like he never knew him at all, and now he wanted to find out everything there was to know about him. Maybe after they found Zack, he could do that.

They went down the hall and followed the sound of a party in full swing. Vaughn's touch was still making his body tingle and the heat of that kiss still flowed through his veins. Waiting in front of the door where the party was, Alex shook himself all over. It didn't do any good, he was still buzzing from the way Vaughn had kissed him.

A girl opened the door and greeted them with a raised red plastic cup. Alex recognized her right away.

"Charlie!" he exclaimed and hugged her while she kept her cup out of spilling range.

"You know her too," Vaughn said.

"I didn't know it was your party. Rea from Joker's called you Charlotte," Alex said to her.

"She only knows me from class and that's what the professors call me."

"This is Vaughn, newspaper nerd and an uptight guy all around," Alex said and threw an arm over his shoulder possessively. Not that he had any kind of claim on Vaughn. But suddenly he felt the need to send out a signal to all the partygoers to look but not touch.

"I guess you're popular," Vaughn said to Charlie on seeing the number of people who had crowded into the smallish apartment.

Charlie disagreed. "No. Beer is popular." Reaching for a short stack of red cups, she handed them two plastic cups with a turkey cartoon, which had been crossed out with a thick, black marker. "You get these at the door and then line up at the keg in an orderly fashion, no shoving." She motioned toward a card table where the keg was the star attraction. A crowd had clustered around it, but Alex saw no sign of any orderly line.

"What's with these cups? Why is the turkey crossed out?" Alex asked Charlie.

"This is an anti-turkey party," she said and pointed out some other crossed out turkey paraphernalia decorating the apartment.

"Don't tell me. You have a bird phobia," Alex said, taking a wild guess.

"No. Turkey Day is just hellish, and I'm warning you, don't even get me started on the stereotypical gender roles. Mom freaking out in the kitchen. My dad and uncle yelling at some sport on TV. Cousins

kicking me under the table. That cousin part has nothing to do with gender roles. They are equal opportunity little shits. Everyone in range had bruised shins," she rambled.

"OK," Alex said when she was done. "Is Wayne Manchez around? We heard he was here."

She frowned and looked around, craning her neck. "I saw him earlier, but I don't know if he's still here. You'll have to comb through this bunch and see for yourself," she told them.

"Oh, by any chance have you seen Zack Lieber?" Alex asked.

Charlie shook her head uncertainly. "I don't think I know him."

Vaughn pulled out his phone and showed her a picture of Zack. "This guy."

She shook her head. "Sorry. Haven't seen him."

As Charlie left them to fend for themselves, Alex looked at Vaughn suspiciously. "You have a picture of Zack? That's interesting," Alex said with a note of accusation in his voice.

"Why wouldn't I?" Vaughn asked.

"No reason, and I don't have any reason to suspect that you have a thing for him, right? I mean you're pissed off at him for picking the wrong guy. Maybe that's because you want him to pick you." Alex jabbed a finger at him, but Vaughn only looked amused at his jealousy.

"Stop being paranoid. I'm not into Zack. I just don't like to see friends making bad choices. And how many pictures of Zack do you have on your phone?" Vaughn asked him.

"That's different. I'm naturally friendly," Alex claimed. "So blond and cute isn't your type. Convince me," he challenged Vaughn, crowding into his personal space.

"Maybe later. Is your natural friendliness the reason you seem to know everyone we run into?" Vaughn asked.

"You would know them too if you weren't borderline antisocial," Alex told him.

"I know plenty of people. I knew that girl at Joker's, didn't I?"

"Did you? You just called her that girl? Are you saying you don't know her name? It's Rea," Alex informed him.

"I know. You just said it when you were talking to Charlie. But it did slip my mind," Vaughn admitted. "I don't know her that well."

"She knew you well enough to declare that you weren't good enough for me," Alex reminded him gleefully.

"That is not what she said."

After filling up their cups, they asked around for Wayne and let drunk people stare at Zack's picture on Vaughn's phone. No one had seen Zack, but they got some info on Wayne from a girl who kept

snapping her rubber bracelet. "His roommate ate some bad stuffing. She didn't know anyone else here so Wayne took her home."

"Wayne sounded drunk when I was texting with him. How is he escorting anyone home?" Alex said, disappointed that they missed him.

She shrugged. "Wayne said he was coming right back though. He has his eye on that muscly cutie," she said and pointed to a black guy who was dancing with two girls. He did have some serious muscle so his moves were limited. With that body, he didn't need to move. He could just stand there like a statue and still look amazing.

"Don't let your eyes fall out of your head," Vaughn said sharply, his tone laced with blatant jealousy.

Alex turned to him slowly, then he just stared. Jealousy looked really good on him. His eyes turned fiery while his voice took on a growly depth.

"Don't worry. You're cute too. In your own way," Alex teased him, and enjoyed how pissed off and sexy Vaughn looked.

With plastic cups of beer in their hands, Alex and Vaughn parked themselves well away from the crowd clustered around the keg. Alex texted Wayne and got some nonsense back. He was pretty sure it meant he was on his way back there. Alex was already swaying to the music while Vaughn was standing stock still, of course.

After a sip of the barely tolerable beer, he nudged Vaughn. "Look alive. Paul didn't say that we couldn't drink just that we couldn't eat, so drink up."

"This beer is terrible and parties aren't my thing anyway," Vaughn said.

Alex shook his head. "One sip of beer and you already don't make any sense. I might have to cut you off."

"Noise and bad beer aren't everyone's idea of a good time."

"Put that beer down. You're crazy drunk. And you're disparaging every party I ever went to. What do you want? Wine and a discussion of foreign policy? Is that more your speed?"

"You don't know anything about me." Vaughn shook his head and looked kind of sad.

"Like what? Come on, what don't I know?" Alex said urging him to talk.

Vaughn seemed to consider it for a moment then he gave Alex a wry grin. "OK. I'll paint you a picture. Growing up, I watched every single one of my brothers and cousins crush a beer can against his forehead. I tried it when I was five and damn nearly gave myself a concussion. I didn't cry though. That wasn't allowed."

Hearing that, Alex put an arm around him and gave him a squeeze.

Glancing at him sideways, Vaughn continued. "When my mom caught my brother, Slade, puking his guts out because he had accidentally swallowed some chewing tobacco, she was livid. She threatened my dad with divorce if he didn't stop chewing and setting a bad example for us boys. He still didn't give it up. He just said Slade needed to toughen up. Slade did, but I didn't."

"You seem plenty tough to me," Alex told him.

"That's not the way my dad would see it," Vaughn said, his eyes looking somewhere far away. "When my dad wanted to take me hunting for the first time, I got up extra early, but not because I was dying to join him and my brothers. I climbed out of my bedroom window and sneaked away from the house. It was still dark when I crawled under the neighbor's porch to hide. A while later I heard my dad and my brothers calling for me. I stayed put until I heard the truck drive away and I was sure they were gone. Every time after that, I did the same thing until my dad gave up on me. But I can still see every dead animal my dad and brothers brought home from their hunting trips in the back of the truck and skinned in the back yard."

"Fuck. Now I'm going to have nightmares," Alex said and put both arms around him, trying to cut him off from the ugly memories and anchor him in the present. After a moment of silence for the poor, dead animals, Alex turned to stare at Vaughn. "Not to stereotype, but this doesn't sound like a gay-friendly environment to grow up in."

Vaughn confirmed it. "It wasn't and it still isn't. If I went back there now, I would have to watch my back. My mom did divorce my dad, not over chewing tobacco though. She remarried and took me away from there. I was the youngest, so I went to live with her and my stepdad. They weren't happy when I came out, but they didn't curse or anything like Dad did. My dad went so red in the face, I thought he might hit me. But he dented the door of the pickup with his fist instead. He still won't talk to me. My brothers send Christmas cards and answer my calls most of the time, but we aren't close."

"Damn. I'm sorry," Alex said and leaned his head on Vaughn's shoulder. Around them the party was still going on, but the two of them were in their own little world.

"And you? How does your family treat you?" Vaughn asked him though Alex suspected it was mainly so he wouldn't have to dwell on his own family situation.

"Annabelle, my sister, is all thumbs up, go to it. My mom and dad worry but they don't give me flack over it. My grandparents are a mixed bag. But my great-grandmother keeps trying to set me up with girls."

"That sounds kind of gruesome," Vaughn said just as Alex heard his phone ring.

As soon as he picked up, Paul's voice came through with an accusing tone. "It sounds like you're at a party, Alex. Care to explain?"

"It wouldn't sound like I was at a party if you texted instead of calling," Alex mumbled. "We're doing reconnaissance," he said louder so Paul could hear.

"It still sounds like a party to me. Have you completely forgotten about your mission?" Paul asked him.

"We're waiting for a guy who might know a guy," Alex told him.

"If you are out there partying your ass off instead of looking for poor, stupid Zack, I will kick your ass," Paul threatened.

"We are looking. I promise. Jeez," Alex said and hung up. "Damn. I forgot to ask about dinner. I've given up on making it back on time anyway and resigned myself to leftovers."

"That guy is waving at you," Vaughn pointed out.

"Wayne!" Alex called out as they went over to meet him half way. "You look more sober than you sounded in your texts," he said on seeing him up close.

"I had to walk to my place and back. A touch of sobriety is the unfortunate side effect. I'll fix that soon enough," Wayne said and eyed the keg eagerly.

Alex didn't let him go over there yet. "First things first." He introduced him and Vaughn then he asked, "You know Zack's ex, right?"

"What about him?"

"Where can we find him? We think Zack might be with him," Alex told him.

Wayne shot down that theory. "Unlikely. He's been out of town. Some kind of business majors' motivational retreat. Sounds like a living nightmare."

"You're sure he isn't back," Vaughn said.

"Haven't seen him, but I did see Zack earlier today. He was bummed so I told him to come here to unwind. He said he would go with Trudy instead. She wanted to take him somewhere for a good time," Wayne told them. "Let me see where she ended up." After a little bit, Wayne shook his head. "No reply. You can hang out or I'll text you when she texts me."

"Why can't we just have her number?" Vaughn asked. He probably didn't trust Wayne to relay the message once he became texting impaired.

"Without her permission? Nah. Trudy isn't the kind of girl you cross. She had to take an anger management class. Then she had to take it again," Wayne said.

"And this is the person that has taken Zack under her wing?" Vaughn asked.

Wayne only shrugged and started heading for the keg.

"One more thing. Why in hell did you introduce Zack to someone like Brad?" Vaughn wanted to know.

"Ease off. It's not like I pushed them together. I just said, ‘This is Brad. This is Zack.' They took it from there," Wayne said reasonably.

"OK. OK. Let's go," Alex said and started pushing Vaughn out the door.

Out of the corner of his eye Alex saw Wayne grab a cup of bad beer and sidle on over to the muscly cutie.

"Jealous?" Vaughn accused Alex. He was so crazy, but his jealousy wasn't mistrust. It was some kind of teasing possessiveness. It was the kind of jealousy Alex could get behind.

Chapter 7

After waving goodbye to Charlie, they went out into the hallway. They should have been heading toward the elevator, but suddenly Vaughn grabbed him and pushed him up against the wall. His blue eyes glowed with an incredible intensity. Pausing close to him, teasing him with possibilities, he made Alex's heart race in anticipation.

Alex's gaze naturally fell to his mouth, and he parted his lips, waiting, hoping. He managed to take one quick breath before Vaughn was on him. His eyes fiery, his mouth suddenly hard against Alex's, he took his breath away. As they kissed, Alex clutched at him like he would drown if he didn't hang on.

He could have kissed him forever, but then a noise down the hall startled them. Vaughn straightened and let him breathe. The noise was the elevator coming up, but it stopped on the floor below. Alex was afraid that the mood was broken, but Vaughn wasn't done with him yet. He looked around then pointed up the stairs.

"Let's see what's up there."

"Nothing. This is the top floor," Alex reminded him.

"Those stairs go somewhere," Vaughn said and led the way up.

At the top of the stairs, he waited for Alex to catch up and eyed him hungrily. The stairs dead-ended at a small landing with one door leading up to the roof. It was locked, of course. But Vaughn had a use for that door anyway. He pushed Alex up against it and started to unzip his fly.

Alex cursed. This was getting serious. He panted as Vaughn's lips grazed over his throat, sending shivers down his spine. Vaughn kissed his way to the open collar of his shirt while his hands were busy with his own fly.

While Alex tried to pull him closer and called his name, Vaughn slid down his body wordlessly. He dropped to his knees in front of him. His hands skimmed down Alex's body and came to rest firmly on his thighs.

When Vaughn freed his hard cock, all Alex could do was stare at him with desperate need and pant in anticipation. Vaughn's hand wrapped around the base of his cock firmly and his tongue swirled the head. A low moan escaped his throat and Vaughn moved down to his balls. He mouthed each one while Alex gasped and shuddered.

Next he licked his way up the shaft and let Alex's cock slide between his lips. Watching Vaughn's mouth swallow him down, Alex braced himself against the cold metal of the door so he wouldn't tumble down.

With Vaughn's mouth on his cock, Alex forgot how to breathe. Seeing

that Vaughn had his own cock in his fist, Alex warned him, "Save that for me. Don't deprive a hungry man."

In response Vaughn grunted and let go of his beautiful, hard cock. Alex moaned at the thought of what he would be doing as soon as Vaughn was done with him. It wouldn't take long either. Vaughn was sucking him hard and fast.

Unfortunately, this wasn't a place where they could take their time or make too much noise. As Vaughn worked him over, Alex did his best not to get too loud. It wasn't easy.

Vaughn's mouth was heaven and his eyes were gorgeous as he stared up at Alex. Just looking at him as he sucked him off made Alex want to come. Then he did. Alex climaxed with his eyes locked on Vaughn's as he swallowed and licked his lips.

"I don't think I hate you any more," Alex panted.

"You think?" Vaughn said as he staggered to his feet.

As soon as he was standing up, Alex grabbed him around the waist and made him stagger again. Now Alex was groping his way down his body and going to his knees in front of him. Leaning against the railing for support, Vaughn called his name and let out a rumbling moan.

*

With Alex kneeling at his feet, Vaughn was in his power completely, helpless to him. Throwing his head back, he hung on to the railing for dear life and surrendered. Feeling Alex's breath, he bit his lower lip. A swipe of his tongue over the head, and in the next instant Alex was taking him deep down into wetness, heat and bliss.

The pressure of his lips and tongue was soft and maddening at first. Vaughn's head dropped forward so he could watch. Alex's head moved back and forth slowly, his eyes locked on Vaughn's. Vaughn was cursing under his breath and gripping the railing behind him with all his strength.

He wanted to pump into Alex's mouth, but he knew better than to rush things like that. Worked up from sucking off Alex, he didn't know how much more he could take. Already he wanted to yell out Alex's name for the whole world to hear.

Taking him deep and slow, Alex drove him right to the edge then pushed him over with fast suction that blew his mind. Sparks danced behind his fluttering eyelids. A jolt of pure pleasure shot up his spine. He was coming, gasping Alex's name and watching him swallow every drop of his come.

Standing up, Alex leaned against him heavily, almost knocking him down. His head on Vaughn's shoulder, he whispered his name. Vaughn

threw his arms around him to hold them both steady while they made themselves decent. Then they started to head down to the elevator on the next floor.

For the first few steps, Vaughn's legs felt shaky, like he was just learning to walk. He wasn't the only one. Alex was slow to follow him. Noticing that he was lagging behind him, Vaughn turned around.

From a few steps below him, Vaughn looked up and just stared. When Alex smiled at him, Vaughn blushed before he turned away. Alex came down to join him and put his arm over Vaughn's shoulder. Vaughn's arm naturally went around Alex's waist. They went down the stairs with their arms around each other, clumsy but feeling good.

This time Alex didn't challenge him to explain himself. What would Vaughn have said? That it was another impulse? He was all impulse around Alex. But it was more than that. This was a cresting of what had been building up inside him all night.

What they did felt so unbelievably good, and not only because he got off. It felt right and true, like a completion of something inside him that had been yearning and gone unfulfilled for so long. He didn't even know how much he needed this until he tasted Alex's come and felt him spilling down his throat. It seemed like a necessity, like something he couldn't live without.

Out in front of the building, Vaughn pulled his jacket tighter around him and took a breath of stinging, cold air. It was a little shocking to be outside in the cold night all of a sudden. Vaughn needed a minute to get his bearings. His mind still fuzzy with thoughts of sucking off Alex, he hardly knew up from down only that he would want Alex again and might pounce on him at any second.

They glanced around idly, not sure where to go next. Alex pointed down the street where they could see some lighted storefronts. As they turned a corner, a blast of cold air hit them hard and Alex shivered.

"Damn. I'm cold," he complained and pulled up the collar of his jacket. "I lost my favorite scarf somewhere. The other one I have is all scratchy."

"See how you like this one," Vaughn told him. He then took off his own scarf and wrapped it around Alex's neck.

Petting the scarf and finding it soft, Alex smiled. "Nice. I approve. But we should share it," Alex told him and wrapped it around both of them, making Vaughn lean over sideways.

"I'm not walking around like this."

"OK. Fine. In that case the scarf is all mine," Alex declared and flipped the scarf around his neck.

Vaughn agreed with that plan. "Yes. That's why I gave it to you."

"Can I keep it forever?" Alex asked.

"You mean can you lose it like you lost your own scarf?" Vaughn said to him archly, not that he ever planned to ask for it back. He had a feeling he would like seeing him wear it.

"I won't lose it. I'll consider it a trophy or maybe a precious memento of a very good blowjob," Alex told him with a smirk.

"Only very good?" Vaughn gave him a stern look out of the corner of his eye.

"OK then, it was amazing. Now you go. How good was it for you?" Alex questioned him.

Vaughn stared straight ahead, trying to give nothing away. "Stop fishing for compliments."

"I'll stop fishing when you give it up. Now tell me how good I was," Alex demanded.

"You set my soul on fire," Vaughn finally told him.

Alex glared at him and tucked his scarf around him possessively. "I hate you," he said, not believing Vaughn's words of praise.

But it was true, so true that it scared him. The thought of sucking him off had obsessed Vaughn, but doing it solved nothing. Now Alex obsessed him even more. His body and soul were on fire for him.

Chapter 8

Walking around with Vaughn's scarf around his neck, Alex was telling himself not to read too much into it. It was a meaningless gesture, and what happened in that stairwell was just some meaningless mutual satisfaction. They were tense and anxious about Zack. They needed a release. Then why the hell did it feel like so much more?

Alex tried to convince himself that it couldn't be anything real. But what they did on that stairway was very real. And every kiss before that was real. Vaughn's hands on him, his mouth on his cock, the taste of his come, even the feel of concrete under his knees – they were still with him. Bombarded by remembered sensations still coursing through his body and over his skin, how could Alex deny that they shared something wonderful?

The deeper meaning of some furtive, sexual activity wasn't the only thing on Alex's mind. Another issue preoccupied his thoughts. "I bet that party pumpkin pie is all gone."

Vaughn looked at him in disbelief. "How could it be all gone? It would take an army. You're obsessed with that monster pie."

"My feelings for that pie are purely platonic," Alex informed him.

"Well, you don't have anything to worry about. That thing was huge. There is no way it's all gone," Vaughn said.

His words of consolation touched Alex's heart. "Aww. You say the sweetest things."

On the next block, Alex spotted a corner store and steered them that way. Once they were in front, he confirmed that they had coffee and gave Vaughn his marching orders. "I'll text Paul with an update. You go and get us some coffees to warm us up and keep us going."

Vaughn wasn't moving fast enough for his liking, so Alex pushed him inside and then pulled out his phone and started texting. The nighttime air had a bite of winter to it, and Alex was glad he had Vaughn's chocolate brown scarf. It felt good for more than one reason. It was warm, it was soft and it smelled like Vaughn.

Done with his updates, Alex put away his phone. A whirlwind of dry leaves in the corner drew his eye. Then he heard someone singing and turned to see an old, homeless lady pushing a shopping cart. Going past him, she smelled terrible as well as boozy and a little cinnamony. She was singing just loud enough for Alex to hear her cracking, mellow voice but not loud enough for him to make out the words.

Alex smiled as he listened and at the same time looked through his pockets for a bill or two he could give her. She would probably spend it on booze, but so what? As he found a few fives among the crumpled

bills he fished out of his pockets, he looked up just in time to see her shopping cart sideswipe a guy in a biker jacket. The old lady just kept going and singing to herself. The hit and run was no big deal, but this idiot wanted to make a big deal out of it just for kicks.

"Watch it, you stinking old bitch," he said and moved on the old lady in a very aggressive way that had Alex worried for her. The guy was looming over her bent form, cursing at her while she cringed away from him.

"Lay off her, you jerk!" Alex yelled to get his attention as he went over to make sure things didn't get ugly. He jammed the money back in his pockets so he would have his hands free, just in case. "It's Thanksgiving and it's not like she broke your damn leg." Though Alex was thinking that maybe someone should break at least one of his legs, maybe two.

"What's it to you, oriental?" The guy said, putting a hell of a lot of emphasis on that last word, like he thought he was being clever or something.

"Umm. Oriental? Really?" Alex scratched his head and grimaced. "Most of the time when people say that, it's because they are clueless, but you're actually using it as an... insult? It's an interesting choice, but it only makes me think of a rug. That's because my mom used to say, rugs are oriental, not people."

The guy gaped at Alex stupidly for a minute. "You fucking talk too much. I think I'm going to like shutting you up. I'm gonna knock your teeth down your throat," he promised and cocked his fist back. He had forgotten all about the old lady. Now all his menace and fury were aimed at Alex, but he was still a good distance from him and not coming any closer.

Alex wasn't impressed. "Don't pretend to be a tough guy. You aren't fooling anyone. That lady barely touched you with her shopping cart and you started bitching and moaning like a truck ran you over."

The guy's face contorted and his eyes grew even meaner than before. "I'm gonna mess you up so bad," the guy threatened but he only edge a little toward Alex, moving sideways because he was too scared to come for him straight on.

He was probably wondering what Alex had going on that made him so brave. Alex wasn't sure himself. Maybe he could take this guy, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Alex was kind of on the skinny side, and the last time he was in actual hand-to-hand combat was in middle school. He did win that one though, but only because the other kid tried to use moves only found in professional wrestling. That crap doesn't work in real life.

Just as Alex was wondering how to neutralize this guy once he came at him, Vaughn came onto the scene. "What the hell is going on here?"

he bellowed from behind him.

"I was just trying to think of the name of the professional wrestling move that this kid in middle school tried to use on me then you started yelling and interrupted my train of thought," Alex said.

Vaughn shoved two coffee cups in his hands. "I don't care what you're up to. I'm talking about that jackass over there," Vaughn said and looked at the biker jacket guy like he would rip him apart with his bare hands.

"So you're a fag too. Sucks to be you," the guy said to Alex.

"I'm doing just fine, you loser," Alex told him then he turned to Vaughn. "Until you made your appearance, he only called me 'oriental'. What is it about you, Vaughn, that says 'gay' so loud and clear, huh?" Alex needled him.

Vaughn only glanced at him briefly, but the sharp look in his eyes said, "After I'm done with that guy, I might just be coming for you". That might be fun. For now, Vaughn was stalking toward that jerk, looking ready to tear him to pieces.

Seeing Vaughn coming for him, the guy in the leather jacket was recalculating his odds in this fight. How long did it take to add one plus one? Throw in the fact that Vaughn had murder in his eyes and it was a no-brainer. Snorting, the guy walked away but shot them a look over his shoulder every few seconds like he thought they might give chase. What a lame idiot.

"Where did that lady go?" Alex asked and looked around for her. Apparently, the old lady had simply wandered off.

"What lady?" Vaughn asked just as Alex spotted her moving at a slow and steady pace down the street.

It didn't take them long to catch up to her, but it wasn't easy to get her attention. She seemed to be in her own little world. Finally she stopped singing and blinked at Alex in confusion.

"Ma'am, you just forget the way that jerk was acting and have a happy Thanksgiving," Alex told her.

The look on her face gave the impression that she might have already forgotten. But she looked happy when Alex gave her some money.

"It's a happy Thanksgiving now. Thanks, peaches. I'm going to buy some nice peppermint schnapps with this," she said and grinned, showing quite a few missing teeth.

Alex grimaced at the idea of peppermint schnapps, not that anyone ever put a gun to his head and made him try it. "That sounds terrible, but it's your money now so it's lady's choice."

"Maybe she shouldn't drink on an empty stomach. We should tell her where to get a Thanksgiving dinner," Vaughn said.

Alex texted Ellen to find out about the nearest place for a free

Thanksgiving meal. Then he told the old lady where it was. She already knew about it, but her priority was her weird peppermint booze, not food.

She went on her way, and all that was left for them to do was wait to hear from Wayne. Now with a coffee cup in his hand, Vaughn kept himself busy by bitching at Alex like he was some kind of hooligan or something. "You picked a fight in the street on Thanksgiving. I can't leave you alone for a minute."

"I didn't pick a fight. He picked a fight," Alex said as he sipped his lukewarm coffee without even a hint of pumpkin spice.

"I might believe that if I had never met you before," Vaughn told him.

"That jerk-faced creep was abusing a poor, homeless old lady on Thanksgiving, no less," Alex informed him.

"Fine. You might be in the right this one time," Vaughn allowed. "Just don't pick any more fights I have to bail you out of."

"The clothesline!" Alex said suddenly. "That's the name of the wrestling move."

"I should have let that guy kick your ass," Vaughn grumbled.

"Oh, don't even. I would have kicked his stupid face in. And I didn't ask for iced coffee, you know," Alex said and raised his cup in condemnation.

"That's your own fault. It was hot enough when I got it, but you wanted to brawl in the street."

Hearing his phone, Alex saw a text from Wayne about Trudy. He hadn't heard back from her, but he found out that she had planned to take Zack with her to Silo.

Vaughn wasn't happy to hear that. "Great. Now we're going clubbing. Tonight is like a reverse bucket list. All the things I don't want to do piling up one after another."

"Don't be so self-centered. This isn't about you. Zack might be there." Alex then realized what Vaughn just said. "Whoa, wait a minute. Am I one of the things you didn't want to do?"

"I thought my enthusiasm was pretty obvious." Vaughn eyed him boldly, but Alex could swear that he was blushing a little at the memory.

"Yeah, you were hot. Good thing too, because that was my first time with anyone since breaking up with Cole," Alex told him. After the breakup, he hadn't felt like jumping into anything, not even a hookup. That is, until Vaughn came along to bring his desire roaring back to life.

"You said you broke up with him. Was he another cheater like Brad?" Vaughn asked.

Alex didn't think Vaughn was trying to twist the knife by asking him

about that, but thinking back to what happened with Cole was still pretty painful. "No, but he did believe that I was cheating on him."

"And you didn't give him any reason?" Vaughn asked.

"No, I didn't and don't you dare start with me. I got enough of that crap from Cole. He was a total jealous freak." Alex's brow furrowed at the memory of all the baseless accusations and how crazy Cole got over nothing. "That's why I can sympathize with Zack. I know from bad exes."

"Sorry," Vaughn said and it sounded like he meant it. "Then maybe he was cheating on you and accusing you out of guilt."

Alex had been so busy trying to prove his innocence to Cole, he never even considered that possibility. "You think so? I don't know. That would be classic projection, wouldn't it? I just know that he didn't trust me and it killed me. It really hurt. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get through to him."

"It was his problem, not yours. Just try to do better next time you pick a guy," Vaughn told him.

"Yes, sir." Alex almost asked him if he had any suggestions, but he didn't dare. Right now the only guy he could think of was Vaughn, but if they weren't on the same page, Alex would be crushed.

Chapter 9

While giving Alex love advice, Vaughn was gritting his teeth and trying not to think about him being with anyone but him. He couldn't be feeling possessive already. It was way too soon for that. He had no claim on Alex after just one blowjob.

And when that creep was harassing Alex, Vaughn had been extremely protective of him. He was ready to go to war if that guy even looked at Alex funny. Idly, he wondered about what that lowlife said. He pegged the two of them as gay only after Vaughn came out of the store. Since Vaughn had always been able to pass for straight back home, he questioned if it was seeing him and Alex together that tipped him off.

Vaughn couldn't help but consider that he and Alex might look like a couple strolling the streets on a late Thanksgiving night. And why the hell did that thought make him smile? Alex would never want to be his boyfriend, and anyway, it wouldn't work. They could never get along. That waitress was right. All the fighting and making up. There he was, smiling again. What the hell was wrong with him? It wasn't like he wanted to spend the rest of his life bickering with Alex. And he was smiling at that thought too. Fucking hell.

As they got closer to Silo, Vaughn was almost glad. Maybe that stupid, noisy place would distract him from having weird thoughts about Alex. The line to get in wasn't too bad. The wind was chilly and brisk making Alex tuck his hands inside Vaughn's open jacket.

"Just warming up," Alex told him.

While they waited, Vaughn wanted to find out more about their target. "Let me guess. You know this Trudy too."

"More or less. I know her girlfriend, Julia, better than her. Trudy has these beautiful tattoos, and she's not shy about showing them off," Alex said and flexed his arms.

"So that's what you're into – muscles and tattoos," Vaughn said, his jealousy back in play. He never thought of himself as the jealous type but Alex was bringing out all sorts of new and unexpected sides of his personality. Vaughn felt like he was discovering who he really was and what he was really like when someone got him going properly.

"Now you're jealous of girls?" Alex said and laughed at him.

Yeah, he probably deserved that. Alex had him stirred up like no one else ever had before, and he was letting himself act like an idiot. It was embarrassing to be so taken with him when Alex didn't have a serious bone in his body.

Looking at him out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the scarf.

Vaughn didn't know what possessed him to give Alex his scarf. That was such a boyfriend thing to do. But that's how Alex made him feel. He wanted to do boyfriend things with him, not just suck him off in some stairwell.

Their turn at the door came and they went inside. Staring around the crowded, noise-filled place with the lights pulsing to the beat, Vaughn tried to orient himself. The dance floor was packed and rows of people were lined up at the bar, reaching over each other for their drinks.

Alex was already moving in time to the music, like his body was letting the beat take over. It was the same hard pounding beat that shook his bones, but Vaughn didn't feel the urge to dance. Like any other time he found himself at a club, every cell in his being screamed at him that he didn't belong here.

"I really don't like clubs," he said, not expecting Alex to hear him.

But he did and scolded him for it. "What's not to like, you uptight freak?"

On thinking about it, Vaughn had to admit that Alex's accusation wasn't completely off base. He did have an undeniable uptight streak. But there was more to it than just feeling out of place in the midst of so much hedonistic abandon. "They're a waste of time. I know I won't find the right guy here," he summed up.

"This isn't where you find the right guy. This is where you find someone to dance with," Alex told him.

Vaughn shook his head. He hardly ever danced. He did manage to push his way through the throng of people at the bar and got them two beers. On his way back to where Alex was waiting, Vaughn scanned the crowd but didn't spot Zack or anyone who looked like this tattooed Trudy. Once he was in sight of Alex, he had trouble turning away to look at anyone but him. Before he even asked Alex if he had any luck, he shook his head at him and sighed.

As Vaughn pushed a beer bottle into his hand, he noticed that Alex was watching the dancers with envy. Vaughn groaned. He couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Come on, let's get in there," he said to the bewildered Alex as he pulled him onto the dance floor.

"Seriously?" Alex asked, not believing what Vaughn had done even as they started to dance with beer bottles in their hands.

"If I didn't dance with you, I know I'd never hear the end of it."

"True," Alex agreed. "But you're supposed to be Mr. Responsible, keeping me on the straight and narrow."

"Not tonight." Vaughn had pretty much already proven that.

"That sounds promising. But aren't we supposed to be looking for Zack or Trudy or anyone else who might know something?" Alex reminded him, leaning in to be heard over the music.

"We can dance and look, or do you dance with your eyes closed?"

Vaughn asked him with a grin.

Alex leaned in even closer to answer him. "Actually, I do. I lose myself to the beat." Dancing right up against Vaughn, he was speaking directly into his ear, letting his lips brush his earlobe, almost kissing it.

Vaughn shivered and pulled back to look at him. At first Alex's eyes were open and smiling then they fell closed. As soon as they did, Vaughn pulled him closer to anchor him, as if he was afraid that he might lose him to the music, to the lights pulsing over his skin, to the sweaty bodies dancing all around them. He had to hold on tight and let Alex feel him as he danced as he in turn felt every gyration of the other man's body.

His body pumping and swaying to the beat, Alex got thirsty and remembered the beer in his hand. They stopped to drink and also to look around for Trudy and Zack. Vaughn kept hoping they would catch sight of Zack dancing without a care in the world, but so far no luck.

Alex tipped back the bottle to finish off his beer, and Vaughn watched his throat work. Quickly he turned his eyes away from the tempting sight. Everything Alex did was too sexy. Vaughn needed to keep his eyes off him.

Done with his beer, Alex went back to dancing. It was like the music was flowing through him. Alex's body moved against him in a seductive rhythm that made Vaughn want to take him right then and there.

The heavy beat, the closeness of Alex's body, all of it had an intoxicating effect on him. He felt like blood pumped through his veins to match the rhythm or maybe the music timed the beating of his heart, taking control of him. Playfully tugging him closer, Alex moved against him, his eyes hypnotic, his lips too tempting not to be kissed.

Holding his face cupped in his hand, Vaughn gave him a slow, sensual kiss. As Alex's arms locked around Vaughn's neck, the kiss went right through him and melted his bones. Reluctantly, they pulled apart, locked eyes for a moment, then Alex looked over his shoulder and pointed.

"That's Julia and Trudy," Alex said and jumped in place, then his face fell. "I don't see Zack with them."

"He might be around somewhere," Vaughn said as they pushed their way through the crowd. They went up to two girls, one with spiked, red hair the other with long black hair and tattoos. Alex motioned them to a quieter spot so they could talk.

"So it is you," the redheaded girl said to Alex. "I thought I saw you earlier dancing with a bottle in your hand."

"If you saw me, why didn't you come over and say hi?" Alex asked her.

"You mean why didn't I yell at you for bringing a beer bottle to the dance floor?" Julia said to him.

"I was thirsty," Alex said. He didn't even look guilty, just shrugged then quickly shifted the blame by pointing a thumb at Vaughn. "And it was his fault anyway. This is Vaughn. That's Julia. That's Trudy. We were hoping Zack might be with you guys."

"We tried to bring him along. Trudy was all over him. She pushed pretty hard but it was a no go," Julia said.

Trudy nodded. "I didn't want him to be alone for Thanksgiving, so I kept at him until he snapped at me. He said, 'It takes everything I have just to keep going, get through each day and pretend that I'm OK. I don't have the energy to pretend I'm having a good time.' That's when I had to give up."

"I don't like the sound of that," Alex said, looking a little scared.

Vaughn got mad instead. "And after Zack said that, you let him go off by himself?"

"Take it easy," Alex said to him.

"What was I supposed to do, put him in a headlock and drag him here?" Living up to her reputation, Trudy made that sound like a very real possibility. "He's chilling at home. Go see him over there."

"No. We already checked. He is not at his place," Vaughn said, still angry. "And no one knows where he is."

"You guys are real worried?" Julia said.

"He told everyone a different story about where he was going to be tonight," Alex explained. "Zack said he was going to be either at home, with his sister or at Paul's just to get people off his back. Where the hell did he go? Come on, think. We need a lead," Alex demanded of the girls.

Trudy gave it some thought. "He has gotten chummy with one of his coworkers at the 24/7. It's some new guy, just started working there maybe a week ago. He's our age and they hit it off."

"Any chance you have his number?" Alex asked.

"Why would I?"

She didn't know his name either. That meant they were now going to the convenience store right by the campus where Zack worked. They headed out right away.

Chapter 10

The night was cold as they made their way to 24/7 and Alex snuggled up to Vaughn. Vaughn took the hint and put his arm around him. As Alex turned his face to him, worry for Zack clouded his expression, but not for long as Vaughn gave him a soft, brief kiss.

"You aren't so bad," Alex told him with a smile. "I'm surprised someone hasn't snapped you up."

"Seeing how things turned out for you and Zack, I'm not sorry I kept things casual. You and Zack need to stop dating these fixer uppers," Vaughn lectured him. He was really just trying to hide what was on his mind.

Alex still took offense. "What does that mean?"

"Don't go and settle for guys who need work just to be halfway decent. Find a good guy then you won't need to fix him," Vaughn told him evenly. He wasn't hinting. It was just good advice.

Alex answered his well-meaning words with sarcasm. "And you can serve as our role model, oh wise one. You and your perfect, move in ready guy." Alex looked all around Vaughn like he was searching for something. "Where is he anyway? Where is this great guy?"

Vaughn found that he was grinning despite himself. The thought that just popped into his head was too stupid. And it couldn't be true. The perfect, great guy couldn't be right in front of him, could he?

The guy in front of Vaughn was annoying and a great kisser. He was a guy who drove him crazy and made him ache inside – a feeling that was both painful and sweet. That feeling was taking over his heart and giving Vaughn all sorts of crazy ideas about their future together.

"What gives? Stop spacing out," Alex told him and elbowed him in the ribs.

"I was just thinking."

"You had a brilliant idea?" Alex prompted him.

Vaughn had to deny that. "No, it was a dumb idea."

"We can use all the ideas right now, even the dumb ones. Spit it out," Alex demanded just as the convenience store where Zack worked came into view at the end of the street.

"Pipe down. I was just thinking that we should have come by the 24/7 before," Vaughn said, both to give Alex some kind of answer and because it was true.

Until now they didn't have a strong reason to come here. They didn't know about this new friend Zack had at work, but that was no excuse. Vaughn should have made sure to cover all the bases. Was he careless all of a sudden because Alex made his head spin? Vaughn looked over at him cautiously, like he thought he might get caught in some kind of

vortex if he looked at him full on.

"We had other leads to follow," Alex said to absolve him of blame.

That wasn't all they did though. "I remember a few detours."

"Oh, do you?" Alex teased him and pulled in close, wrapping both arms around Vaughn. That made it awkward to walk side by side but Vaughn didn't mind.

"You don't really think I'm bad at relationships, do you?" Alex asked all of a sudden.

"Bad? No. Of course not."

"Doomed?"

"Why are you asking me this?" Vaughn wondered.

"What's wrong with me then?" Alex asked peevishly.

"Nothing, you just aren't very serious."

Alex was ready to disagree, maybe even get offended, but then he thought better of it. "OK. I'll give you that one. But I can get serious."

"Maybe one day you can prove that to me," Vaughn challenged him. As their eyes met, he had to turn away. Those stunning eyes of his had undone him every time, and Vaughn was too afraid of the next feeling that would come along and throw him for a loop. While he was busy fighting this losing battle against his attraction to Alex, he couldn't remember why he fought so hard.

He wondered how far back that resistance went. When it came to acting on his feelings, it seemed like he had always been telling himself a firm no. Denying what was in his heart was second nature to him. It was drilled into him long ago by the frown on his father's face and all the derision from his brothers.

Looking up at the half bare trees along the sidewalk, Vaughn remembered how the woods around his home town were stark and sad looking after they lost their leaves. As a little kid, he couldn't wait for the first snowfall to bring some cheer to the place.

When he woke up to snow falling and the world turning white outside, he rushed to the window of the bedroom he shared with his brother, Keith. He couldn't contain his excitement as he exclaimed, "Look! Everything is pretty!"

"What are you, a girl?" his brother, Keith, asked offhandedly.

He gave no more thought to what he said than to dropping his dirty clothes on the floor for their mom to pick up. But Vaughn shut his mouth and took the lesson to heart – boys don't find things pretty, or if they do, they stay quiet about it. There was a bigger lesson in that. If you like it, keep it to yourself. Especially if you like another boy.

Keeping quiet about things didn't make his feelings go away though. But there were times when Vaughn worried that his emotions had been smothered. When people accused him of being heartless because of some opinion or article he wrote, he wondered about himself.

He wasn't always like that. Vaughn remembered how as a child he breathlessly waited for snow. Jumping out of bed, he ran to the window every morning to check if it snowed overnight. If it did, he would be bursting with impatience to go outside to feel and taste it and to lie in the freshly fallen snow.

For a long time, Vaughn didn't think anything could make him feel that way again. That kind of simple yearning had died inside him. Until now. Tonight Alex brought back that same sense of anticipation and excitement, of wide-eyed certainty that good things were coming. Nothing had died. Alex just had to work his magic on him.

As they walked to the convenience store, the wind kicked up yellowed leaves and drove them up against the curb and around their feet. They stopped on the sidewalk outside the 24/7 and looked in. Inside the store, they saw a few customers and a lanky guy standing behind the counter. He had spiked hair with green tips and lots of piercings.

Peering through the glass at him, Alex seemed to recognize him. "I've seen that guy at school."

"How could you miss him?" Vaughn said. He wasn't surprised any more. At this point, he pretty much expected Alex to know everybody.

Alex made a prediction. "I bet that's Zack's new buddy."

"Are you psychic all of a sudden?" Vaughn said while eyeing Alex instead of the guy behind the counter.

"No, but that's the kind of guy Zack would hit it off with."

Vaughn didn't buy it. "Since when? I don't know about the others, but Brad was a clean shaven, polo shirt and chinos guy."

"Boring and a cheater," Alex summed him up. "Zack's taste in boyfriends is really vanilla, but his taste in friends is more out there. And look at this guy. He's like a male version of Trudy," Alex said as he pushed open the door of 24/7.

"I've seen you around campus. Kyle?" Alex said to the guy behind the counter.

"Kevin," the guy said while looking from him to Vaughn.

"I'm Alex. This is Vaughn. Are you friends with Zack by any chance?"

"You know him?" Kevin said.

"Yes and we're worried about him," Vaughn said. "Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Kind of." Kevin looked worried too and that wasn't a good sign. "He seemed a little self-destructive and went to see this guy, one of his exes."

"Brad? But he's out of town, isn't he?" Vaughn asked.

Kevin shook his head. "Not that ex. It's an ex from before, some guest lecturer that Zack hooked up with when he was still a freshman. Zack

got a funny look on his face when he told me about him. He said, 'I wish I never met him. Sometimes when I'm feeling down, I like to drop by his place just to remind myself what hell is really like.' The guy wrecked his heart."

"Fuck," Alex said in alarm.

Vaughn was skeptical. "Zack said that about him and you think he went to see him?" he asked Kevin.

"This is what I know," Kevin told them. "Zack said his heart wasn't all the way crushed after Brad. He wanted someone to finish him off and he knew just the man for the job. Then he asked to borrow my car and I didn't let him. No way. I told him to go to that party at his place or anywhere where he had friends, but he wouldn't listen. He said, 'I know where I need to be.' If I didn't let him borrow my car, he was just going to go by bus. So I caved and handed over my car keys." Kevin shrugged but he seemed to be having major second thoughts about enabling Zack's self-destructive quest.

"I don't suppose you have the most toxic ex's number?" Alex asked.

Kevin raised a pierced eyebrow at him. "Zack tells me how horrible this guy is and I'm supposed to ask for his number?"

"The way our luck is running, I guess it was too much to hope for," Vaughn said, feeling frustrated and worried about what Zack had gotten himself into.

"Damn. Whatever it takes, we have to chase him down," Alex said. "Did you at least get the address? I mean, Zack did take your car."

"All I know is that this guy has a house in Huntersville," Kevin said.

"And his name?" Vaughn asked.

Kevin shook his head.

"Wait. He has a house? How old is this guy?" Alex wondered. "Not our age obviously."

"Pushing thirty or something," Kevin said.

"With no address or name, how are we supposed to find him?" Alex asked and turned to Vaughn for ideas.

"Huntersville isn't that big. We'll drive around and look for Kevin's car." He turned to Kevin. "Give me your license plate, make, model, and color of your car. And any other distinguishing characteristics."

"Could you sound more like a cop? And how are we driving around to look for his car?" Alex asked since neither of them owned a car.

"Carlos has a car, but I didn't see it in front of Paul's apartment building." Vaughn then texted with him while Alex updated Paul and also grabbed some drinks for the road.

Outside the 24/7, Alex was still on his phone but no one knew anything about Zack's ex who lived in Huntersville. Alex sighed in frustration as he read one more unhelpful text. The glow of his phone screen lit his face, and for a moment Vaughn was mesmerized. So

what if his eyes were beautiful? That was no reason to stare at him so obsessively. Vaughn forced himself to look up. In the treetops above, a few dry, twisted leaves were still stubbornly clinging to the branches.

After Alex put away his phone, Vaughn noticed the troubled expression that lingered on his face. Vaughn was worried too. To make them both feel better, he took Alex in his arms. "Cheer up. We're looking for him. We'll find him. And if it turns out he's done something stupid, we'll kick his ass."

"Damn right we will," Alex agreed and surprised him with a kiss.

Chapter 11

Alex was apprehensive about Zack, but he felt better having Vaughn there to kiss and fondle. Carlos told them that his car was parked at his place. Going over there, they got the car keys from his roommates.

Not too long after that, they were on the road and Alex was getting handsy. Not that many other cars were on the road leading to the small suburb of Huntersville. Streetlights reflected off the hood of Carlos's Dodge, and Alex leaned in to invade the driver's side of the car.

While Vaughn stared straight ahead, Alex stared at his profile intently. Lights and shadows played over his face, and it made for a mesmerizing sight. Alex couldn't keep his hands off him. He started by sneaking a hand inside Vaughn's jacket and stroking his chest through his shirt. Alex felt him take in a deep breath then slowly let it out while trying to stay in control.

Alex leaned closer and let his lips brush the sharp line of his jaw. His hand trailed down, fingers playing along Vaughn's ribcage until he pushed up his shirt and felt up his tight abs. From there, he moved down over his belt but only skimmed his crotch. He felt the hard muscle of Vaughn's leg twitch as he gripped it. His hand was firm on Vaughn's thigh, his fingertips tapping along the inseam of his jeans.

"I'm throwing you in the trunk," Vaughn threatened with a sharp intake of breath.

"What's the problem? You're not supposed to text and drive. No one said anything about getting groped while driving," Alex said and lightly ran the palm of his hand up his thigh. He curled his fingers in and let his knuckles rub over Vaughn's zipper. Vaughn's hips rose then settled back down with a grunt.

"I'll crash," he said in a husky, breathless voice.

"Then you should have let me drive," Alex told him.

"If I had my hands free, you wouldn't be safe from me for even one second," Vaughn threatened as a predatory light came into his eyes.

"Sometimes you know just what to say," Alex said and kissed him on the cheek quickly. After one firm squeeze of his thigh, he let him go. "OK. I'll be good. For now."

Huntersville was a really nice neighborhood edged on one side by Three Oaks Preserve. The houses were diverse but always with a touch of hunting cabin about them. The evergreens lining the road were huge, filling up the spaces between houses so that it seemed like all the houses sprang up out of the woods. It must be an interesting place to live, if you could afford it. How in hell did Zack end up with an ex

boyfriend who lived here?

It wasn't long before Vaughn spotted Kevin's Honda in front of a house with the number 214 on the mailbox. There were lights on inside. Vaughn pulled over and the car cruised to a stop on the gravel covered driveway. They had parked facing a huge, raised porch, almost a deck. The place was an upscale version of rustic with lots of exposed wood beams everywhere.

Getting out of the car, Alex looked around at the grounds thick with evergreens and bushes. It was like the house was in the middle of a forest. Mostly it was an illusion, but it was kind of cool. He even heard something scurrying in the undergrowth. Alex peered around curiously. There had to be wildlife around there.

"Why are you looking in the bushes? We aren't searching for a lost cat," Vaughn told him.

"I thought I heard something. I bet they have wild animals out here," Alex said as they went up the porch steps.

Vaughn knocked on the front door and they waited impatiently for someone to answer. This late, they would be lucky not to get the cops called on them instead. A slim, tall, good-looking, black guy in glasses opened the door. He seemed ready to say something, but Alex didn't let him.

"Is Zack here?" he blurted out.

"Are you friends of his?" the guy asked. His voice was deep and the guy was definitely hot. He looked kind of like a professor, but if he was a professor at their school, Alex would have definitely noticed him. But he was noticing something else about him.

"He is pushing thirty," Alex said as he peered at the guy's face. He looked like he might have even pushed past thirty, but not by much.

"Are you calling me old?" the old guy asked.

Alex didn't mince words. "Yes."

"Don't be ageist. We're here to rescue Zack, not insult old guys," Vaughn told him.

"Rescue Zack?" the guy said.

Vaughn didn't explain himself. He just started yelling. "Zack, get your ass out here!" he called out into the house.

His voice was so loud, Alex had to cover his ears. He almost didn't hear Zack cursing from inside the house.

"I guess he heard you," Alex said.

"The whole neighborhood heard you," Zack's ex groused.

When he came out to see what the ruckus was all about, Zack looked freshly showered with damp hair and a towel around his waist. Seeing Alex and Vaughn, he stared at them openmouthed and mad.

Alex turned to Vaughn. "Look at him. He just got out of the shower. And why did he need to take a shower? Aha. You know what that

means, don't you? They were up to something filthy."

Vaughn didn't get a chance to say anything because Zack started bitching at them. "What are you doing here and why the hell were you yelling?"

"We were demanding proof of life," Alex told him and stepped inside the big living room space. Vaughn followed. Behind them, the bad ex sighed and closed the door.

Zack stared at Alex and tried to make sense of what he was saying. "You think I'm being held hostage?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Alex said but Vaughn had his own answer.

"Or you are just being stupid and repeating all your old mistakes of your own free will," Vaughn emphasized the word old and gave the bad ex the side eye.

"I don't need rescuing," Zack said through gritted teeth.

"Then why the hell did you come all the way out here on some kind of self-destructive ex hunt?" Vaughn asked.

"What?" Zack said, looking utterly confused.

"We missed Thanksgiving dinner, ran all over town and borrowed Carlos's car. All to rescue you from your bad ex," Alex told him.

"He isn't a bad ex. He's a good ex," Zack said and pointed at his ex.

The guy had taken a seat in an armchair. His long legs were crossed while he leaned his chin on the heel of his hand and looked like he was so over it. Under his buttoned up shirt and slacks, it looked like he had a hard, lean body. And he was being incredibly patient about this intrusion into his house, so maybe he had potential.

Vaughn wasn't convinced. "You say that now," he said and looked Zack up and down. Still wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist, Zack wasn't the most convincing character witness.

"Stop ogling him," Alex said and swatted Vaughn on the arm.

"I wasn't ogling him," Vaughn said.

"Were you getting fashion tips? You would look good in that outfit," Alex said and tried to picture Vaughn stepping out of the shower.

"Outfit? The towel?" Vaughn said, but in Alex's imagination the towel was already on the floor and his groping hands had taken its place.

"I think I'll go get dressed," Zack said. "Oh, this is Ted. These two are Alex and Vaughn."

"Nice to meet you," Ted said but more like a question than a statement.

"Sorry we barged in on you guys," Vaughn said.

"We wouldn't have if Zack answered just one of the barrage of texts we've been sending," Alex pointed out.

"I had my phone turned off because I didn't want to answer a barrage of texts," Zack yelled from the next room.

"What is it with people turning off their phones? That shouldn't be a

thing. We missed dinner because if you," Alex told him.

"That's sweet of you, I guess," Zack said, but he didn't sound either remorseful or grateful.

"Not to us, it isn't," Alex told him.

"Why did you lie to everyone and then come here? You had us running all over town looking for you," Vaughn said to him.

Zack waited until he was dressed, then he came back into the living room and answered. "Sorry, but I didn't know anybody would come looking for me," he said.

"Of course we would look for you. So why come here of all places?" Alex asked and motioned around at the stuffy, serious, and ultra-masculine decor of the place.

"Because Ted is here," Zack stated simply.

"What's so special about him?" Alex asked and looked Ted up and down critically. He was hot, stern and serious, but he didn't seem like Mr. Excitement.

"Everything! Ted is a great guy. But I wasn't sure he would even want to see me," Zack said sadly then he looked over at Ted and smiled. "When I came here, I was so scared he would send me away. I was desperate for someone to care about me, to show me I was worth something. OK!" Zack was now getting defensive and blushing.

"We care about you, you idiot," Vaughn told him.

"That's nice, but a hot fuck doesn't come with that," Zack said.

"No, it doesn't," Vaughn confirmed.

"So he is a good ex. I didn't know there was any such thing," Alex said.

"There is if you screw up the best thing that ever happened to you. Ted broke up with me because I was an insecure jerk. He decided I wasn't mature enough for him and broke my damn heart, so I hated him. Now you two owe him an apology," Zack demanded.

"There's no need for that. They were just worried about you," Ted said proving he was a nice guy after all.

"Sorry. Thanks for taking care of him, I guess," Vaughn said grudgingly.

Zack wasn't happy with Vaughn's version of an apology. "Don't make me sound like..."

"A lost, brokenhearted little kitten that was taken in by a kind stranger," Alex finished for him.

"You jerk," Zack told him.

Instead of taking offense, Alex opened his arms wide. A grin spread across his face as he rushed at Zack. "We were so busy trying to save you from yourself, we forgot to be happy that we found you safe and sound," Alex told him.

"Don't get too clingy," Vaughn warned him, getting all growly and

stern as he watched him hug Zack to death.

"Stop being jealous. You need to get in here too." Alex tried to pull him into a three-way hug with Zack, but he resisted.

"I'm not the touchy feely type," Vaughn claimed.

"You've been touching and feeling me plenty," Alex reminded him.

"Oh no! No way. Not you two," Zack objected and looked between them in horror.

"Says the guy with the worst judgment of anybody ever," Alex told him.

"Are you listening to yourself? You're parroting Vaughn. He has ruined you," Zack said.

Alex agreed. "For all other men, yes."

"It's your fault Alex and I are together. We teamed up to save you," Vaughn informed him.

"And who is going to save you from each other?" Zack asked while Alex mouthed the word "together".

"Give it a rest, Zack. We missed Thanksgiving dinner because of you," Vaughn said.

"Now you sound like me," Alex noted. "Zack might be right. I think we're be rubbing off on each other."

"You aren't the only person in the world who gets hungry," Vaughn said.

"Point taken. Now let's go to Paul's and see if that turkey carcass has been picked clean. And there better be stuffing left or I'll murder someone," Alex vowed.

They said goodbye to Zack and apologized some more to Ted. Then they got on the road.

"I think we made a bad first impression on Ted, but I'm so happy for Zack," Alex said to Vaughn as they drove out of Huntersville. "It looked like he and Ted really reconnected. And he seemed like a good guy, right? Even you thought so, and you don't like anybody."

"That is not true. And a minute ago, you thought he was too old for Zack," Vaughn reminded him.

"Zack is happy. And a young guy doesn't come with an awesome house like that," Alex told him.

"It wasn't that great," Vaughn said only proving that he didn't like anything.

Chapter 12

For a little while the car was silent as Alex texted an update to Paul and told him they were on their way. They were driving through a wooded area, nothing but trees and bushes on either side of the road. The headlight beams cut through the night and spotlighted random tree trunks when the road curved.

"How long can you wait for dinner?" Vaughn asked all of a sudden.

Alex didn't like the sound of that. "Why do you ask? Did we run out of gas or something?" he said, panicking a little.

"I'm asking because I'm about to pull over and fuck the living hell out of you," Vaughn said, his voice gravelly.

For a minute, Alex couldn't even speak while his heart raced. Did Vaughn really say that? Then he realized he better get over his disbelief fast. If he didn't speak up, Vaughn might think he wasn't interested.

"Pull over," Alex said hurriedly. He was nervous, but at the same time he couldn't wait. He had never been this excited in his whole life. His heart felt like it would burst out of his chest and he was ready to attack Vaughn right now.

Vaughn swerved into a thicket and drove over bumpy ground until the car was out of sight. As soon as he stopped the car, Alex was kissing him. Vaughn barely managed to put the car in park and turn the engine off. The world went dark around them and they both froze for a second.

"Back seat," Vaughn said and opened the driver's side door.

Alex didn't even bother just climbed in between the seats while cursing. After getting his jacket off, he positioned himself sideways on the seat with one leg anchored against the driver's seat. He couldn't believe this was really happening. It seemed unreal. Still in shock, he watched Vaughn get in and close the door behind him.

When he turned to Alex, the front of his jeans strained against his erection. Vaughn looked down at Alex, his lustful gaze sinking inside him like an unspoken promise. With Alex tugging him closer impatiently, Vaughn climbed into the space Alex had left for him, right between his parted legs.

Kneeling over him, Vaughn took his jacket off then leaned over him for a thorough kiss. Alex pulled him down and locked his legs around him. His tongue exploring, thrusting into his mouth, Vaughn was grinding into him, driving him wild.

Alex swallowed a moan as he felt himself getting incredibly hard. He reached for his fly but Vaughn was quicker. He drew back to give himself some room. Deftly, he unzipped Alex's fly and then his own.

Chest heaving, Alex watched him pull his jeans down to his knees and then free his own cock.

Alex gulped then tried to bring Vaughn down on top of him again. Vaughn held him still with a hand on his chest. They were both breathing hard as Vaughn got a bag from his jacket pocket. Alex was happy to see what he had in the bag – condoms and lube.

"Where did that come from?" Alex wondered.

"I got it back at that store when I got us coffee. I was thinking ahead," he admitted guiltily.

"I think I like you," Alex said as Vaughn got them ready.

Vaughn placed Alex's left leg over his shoulder. His hand pushed down on the back of Alex's thigh. Alex was now fighting for every breath. Anticipation building, his heart beating out of control, Alex waited for that first contact to send a jolt through him.

When it came, Alex gasped in shock. Just a touch of Vaughn's fingers at his hole and he was already going out of his mind. He had to calm down or he would lose it. Reaching for Vaughn, Alex wanted to beg him to fuck him already. But as his lubed finger slowly circled his hole, all he said was "Please."

His eyes fell closed and he told himself to breathe. Vaughn's fingers pushed in and he moaned through the sensation. He wouldn't survive much more of this. He wanted Vaughn so much.

"Don't torture me," Alex warned him.

Vaughn didn't want to wait either. He lubed Alex quickly then positioned himself over him. Peering up at him expectantly, Alex shuddered. His cock hard and ready, Vaughn looked down at him and smiled. Then his blue eyes grew dark and hooded.

Vaughn's fingers were digging into his thighs as he growled Alex's name in his ear. He pushed in with excruciating slowness. The insistent pressure made his body give in, and Alex moaned long and loud as Vaughn filled him up. It seemed to go on forever, the feeling unbearable and exquisite, driving him to buck and moan under the weight of Vaughn's body.

When Vaughn was all the way in, Alex couldn't think or take a breath. It was a wonderful, overwhelming sensation that pushed him to his limit. Then Vaughn pushed him further. He kissed him and sent him flying while he pinned him down to the narrow back seat. The kiss ended when Vaughn started fucking him again, filling the car with grunts and moans and the obscene sounds of their bodies colliding.

Alex had to brace himself for each thrust. Shaking uncontrollably, he was so out if it. He was calling out Vaughn's name over and over again without even realizing it. Vaughn was everything to him in that moment.

If Vaughn could make him feel like this, Alex would give him anything. He would let him tear his heart right out of his chest. But maybe he didn't have a choice. Maybe Vaughn had already taken it.

Losing all sense of himself, Alex was gasping for breath, clawing at Vaughn, desperate to feel him come. Above him, Vaughn's body was turning to steel. Alex couldn't hold on much longer. Already his hand was reaching for his cock. Lost in a daze, with Vaughn hitting him just right, sanity slipped away from him, leaving only mindless screams of pleasure.

*

A fuck in the back of a car wasn't something Vaughn usually indulged in. He was more cautious than that. Fear of discovery was never far from his mind. But Alex had inspired a newfound recklessness in him. He had stirred up all sorts of new feelings and chased away old fears.

So here was Vaughn fucking Alex like a madman, reveling in the feeling of being inside him. Alex's dark eyes were open to him, dragging him down into unknown depths. They were both close, dying to come. In slow motion Alex's hand was moving down his body. Then there it was, unbearable tightness pulsing around Vaughn's cock sending him into oblivion.

Pleasure thundered through him more powerful than anything he had ever felt before. He was falling and being caught in Alex's arms. Alex brought him back to reality, cursing breathlessly, mussing his hair and tugging at it.

As he slumped into him, Vaughn never wanted to move from this wonderful place. He wanted to stay wrapped in his warm embrace forever with his breath huffing softly against Alex's neck, his name on Alex's lips.

"Don't go to sleep on me," Alex warned him, feeling him getting too comfortable. "You made me forget about dinner for a little while, not forever."

"I made you forget dinner? I must have done you right," Vaughn said as he turned his head and nibbled on his ear.

"You know you did," Alex said and squeezed him tightly.

"And it's not just a memory lapse. You put off Thanksgiving dinner for me. Must be serious," Vaughn said to him while pushing his face into the crook of his neck and breathing him in.

"I know. I must be fucking crazy about you," Alex said as Vaughn raised his head and their eyes met.

"Me too," Vaughn confessed. "I never felt like this before." He was deadly serious now. He wanted Alex to know he meant every word.

"So does that mean that we're going to keep seeing each other?" Alex said while he eyed Vaughn intently. He was getting serious too.

"I pretty sure I won't be able to stay away from you," Vaughn told him and gazed at him with longing.

"And then you'll break my heart?" Alex asked.

Vaughn denied it. "No, you'll break my heart and I'll let you. And yes, I do have one."

"Good to know. I'll be careful and try not to break it too bad," Alex said and kissed him sweetly. He ended the kiss with a regretful moan. "Now take me where there's food before I kill you. The way we're going, we'll be eating Thanksgiving breakfast not dinner."

Vaughn laughed, but the murderous look in Alex's eyes told him that this was no laughing matter. But even if he was on the verge of death, Vaughn was still happy. He was grinning to himself as he cleaned up and pulled his clothes back on.

"I can't believe this turned into the best night of my life," Vaughn said, but Alex had only one thing on his mind.

"I'm going to starve to death. Screw this. I'm driving," Alex said and climbed over him to the front seat. He only zipped up once he was behind the wheel. When Vaughn climbed through to the front, Alex was already backing the car onto the road. Vaughn waited a bit then he put a hand on Alex's knee. It didn't seem wise to bother an agitated driver, but Vaughn needed the contact, the reminder that this was real.

Chapter 13

Alex was tempted to run every red light on the way to Paul's place until Vaughn asked him nicely not to get them killed. Since he had done such a fantastic job fucking him, Alex decided to spare his life. Especially since Vaughn said they would keep seeing each other. That was the best news.

Alex had been afraid that this night was just a one-off, a taste of something he couldn't have. Though he tried to push it away, that thought was already starting to break his heart. But there was Vaughn surprising him again and again.

He even reached over to squeeze his knee. Vaughn's hand stroked up his thigh from time to time, but only when they stopped at a light. It was a casual touch and also a welcome reminder that he wasn't done with Alex.

In the lobby of Paul's building, Alex was ready to race up the stairs instead of bouncing on his toes, waiting another second for the elevator to arrive. Vaughn grabbed the back of his jacket and wouldn't let him. Once again, Alex suspected him of having an elevator fetish. On the way up, Alex plastered himself to him.

"You know how to show a guy a good time," Alex praised him.

"And I wasn't even trying. Wait till we have our first date," Vaughn told him and then kissed him until the elevator doors opened.

"Don't tell Carlos what we were up to in his car," Alex whispered while they headed for Paul's apartment then waited for Paul or someone to open the door.

Vaughn agreed. "Goes without saying." Then he grinned.

Seeing the grin, Alex warned him, "Wipe that look off your face or you'll give it away."

"I'm not sure I can. Or maybe I just don't want to," Vaughn said and gave him a peck on the cheek. He was so brazen and cheerful all of a sudden. Paul and the others were going to see right through him.

Once they were in, everyone wanted to know more about what Zack had been up to. Alex and Vaughn filled them in on how Zack sent them on a wild goose chase before they found him in an indecent condition and perfectly happy with his old ex.

"So him and this Ted are getting back together?" Ursula asked. She was back on the couch with her foot up almost the way they left her, but she was facing away from the kitchen door this time.

"Looked that way to me," Alex said. "And Vaughn didn't hate that Ted guy on first sight, so that's a good sign." Alex nudged him to get him to agree, but Vaughn decided to be Vaughn.

"I reserve judgment until I see how things play out," he said stubbornly.

"I thought you turned over a new leaf," Alex said.

"Only where you are concerned," Vaughn told him with a small smile.

Seeing them being chummy, Paul pounced on them. "What's going on with you two? What am I seeing here," he asked and pointed an accusing finger at the two of them.

"We're seeing each other," Vaughn stated simply, but Paul and the others treated it like it was news of cataclysmic proportions.

"No, you don't. I'm not dealing with the nuclear fallout of you two getting together. I order you to split up right now. Go to neutral corners. Don't even look at each other," Paul demanded while Carlos laughed.

"Why does everyone have this reaction?" Alex asked, exasperated by all the naysayers.

"Who cares? They can't keep us apart," Vaughn said and kissed Alex defiantly. Showing a united front, they turned to face their friends. Alex draped his arm over his shoulder while Vaughn circled his waist with his arm.

"I'm willing to offer my congratulations and best wishes, but don't come crying to me when this thing blows up in your faces," Carlos told them.

Vaughn gave him a wry smile. "Thanks for that first thing you said."

"And for that second thing, we screwed in your car," Alex informed him vindictively.

Carlos made a face, and Vaughn cursed and blushed. Seeing him like that, Alex kissed him on the cheek and ruffled his hair.

"Look at them. Isn't this one of the signs of the apocalypse?" Ursula asked from her perch on the couch.

"I'm scared. Hold me," Val said and went over to cuddle with her.

That's when Alex came to a realization. "You are all drunk, aren't you?" he said and shot an accusing look all around.

"That's right, you were going to make some weird punch," Vaughn remembered.

Paul took offense at his description. "That punch was a masterpiece."

"It was good," Val agreed. "Nice and strong, not too sweet." By the look of her, she had plenty.

"I hear a lot of past tense when you talk about this punch," Alex said worriedly.

Carlos confirmed that he was right to worry. "I'm afraid it's a late, great, dearly departed punch," he told them.

"Oh, no," Alex said and immediately went into mourning.

"There's plenty of food left," Carlos reassured him.

Alex rushed off into the kitchen and started warming up food and loading his plate. In his feeding frenzy, he didn't forget about Vaughn. He made sure he left some for him.

Starved, the two of them took a seat at the table and dived in. It might have been leftovers, but what Carlos made was still a feast. That man was going to be a culinary star. Val and Ursula hung out for a while then started for home.

"Finally it's Thanksgiving," Alex said between mouthfuls of chestnut and sausage stuffing. Then he caught Vaughn smiling at him and he was truly happy. With Vaughn next to him, it was a perfect Thanksgiving.

*

They had barely made it in time. After all that craziness, Vaughn really wanted to end this night the right way – sitting down to a Thanksgiving dinner with Alex by his side. When they started eating, it had just struck midnight, so this meal was still officially Thanksgiving dinner.

The best thing about it was that he got to share it with Alex. His face beaming, he was beautiful even in his gluttony. Being with him made Vaughn feel so right. It was like being home, a place that he only remembered from long ago and which was fading from his memory a little more every day.

"Since you guys did all that legwork, we saved you the wishbone," Carlos said and handed it over to them.

"Make a wish," Alex said and offered Vaughn the other side of it. It broke in Alex's favor. "Now you're mine forever," he said with a wicked grin.

"OK," Vaughn said like it was no big deal.

"I mean it," Alex said threateningly. "Wishbone wishes are legal and binding. You're mine now."

"And I said OK." Vaughn kept a straight face until Alex grabbed him and kissed him.

Carlos and Paul kept them company while they ate, and they filled them in on how dinner went. Then it was time for Alex and Vaughn to head out. They left with Alex protectively clutching a bag with leftover stuffing and pumpkin pie. When they got in the elevator, Vaughn reached for the leftovers playfully. Alex growled at him.

Looking at Vaughn, he changed his tune a little. "You are kind of cute. I'll share this with you if you're good."

Vaughn laughed. "I'll be very good."

Stepping off the elevator, they strolled outside uncertainly then

lingered on the sidewalk.

"So where are we going now?" Alex finally asked.

"Not your dorm room, that's for sure. My place," Vaughn said. He acted like it was a given, but he was worried that they would have to say goodnight and go their own way. Now he was so happy that they would be spending the night together.

As they went to his place, it was past midnight and the streets were nearly deserted. Few cars passed. The night was quiet. The sky full of stars. Vaughn walked with his arm around Alex, who was still cuddling those leftovers.

Vaughn caught himself thinking how they were going to have one strange relationship. Jumping ahead like that didn't seem to bother him like it should have. Even if they were brand new, his feelings were solid and real.

He was tired of holding himself back anyway. He was done with that. Since the first time he heard his father and brothers say homophobic things as casually as breathing, he started building a wall. He heard others say those kinds of things too and no one ever disagreed. Even when he got older and he knew better, some final barrier remained in place keeping him repressed.

Then Alex came along and shattered everything that once bound him and made him feel alone. In Vaughn's eyes, Alex was an unstoppable force, reaching inside him like touching another man's heart was only natural. With no hesitation, Alex took his heart and ran away with it while grinning and whooping in triumph. It was that easy for him.

Right now Alex was making sure to step on dry leaves that littered the sidewalk to make them crunch under his feet. Then he stomped on a whole pile of them like he was doing a dance. As they neared his building, Alex scoped out his neighborhood for good places to eat. Vaughn looked forward to taking him to every one of them.

At the door to his apartment building, Vaughn felt strangely nervous. He couldn't remember the last time he took anyone home with him. Whenever it was, it was nothing like this. This was the start of something crazy and wonderful.

"So that was our first Thanksgiving together," Vaughn said as they waited in the lobby for the elevator to arrive, and he took Alex's hand in his.

"First Thanksgiving? I like the sound of that. But next year I expect you to cook for me," Alex demanded as they got on the elevator and Vaughn pressed five.

"I can't cook," Vaughn told him. He should have already known that.

"You have a year to learn," Alex said and grinned at him while giving

his hand a strong squeeze.

One seductive grin from Alex was all it took, and Vaughn was all over him. He pushed the bag of leftovers out of the way and grabbed Alex for a hard, thorough kiss. Bodies colliding, they groped and kissed until the elevator doors opened on his floor.

Alex stayed in the circle of his arms, letting the doors close again. "I told you that you had a thing for elevators," Alex told him while panting.

"I have a thing for you." Running his thumb along Alex's bottom lip, Vaughn leaned in for another kiss.

Chapter 14

Vaughn's apartment was small and sparsely furnished, and that's just how he liked it. He and his roommate, Henry, kept it tidy. Henry was a nerd and a neat freak, and proud of both of those things. He and Vaughn got along well. Good thing since the place was so small.

As he and Alex went in, Vaughn saw Henry was back from his Thanksgiving dinner with his family. "Hi. You're back. How was your Thanksgiving?" Vaughn asked him while he showed Alex where to stow his leftovers.

"It was fine. I drove back a little while ago," Henry said but he was distracted by seeing Alex with his arm around Vaughn. "What's this?" He asked looking from Alex to Vaughn with dread.

Vaughn realized he hadn't introduced them yet. He was definitely nervous. "This is Henry, my roommate. This is my boyfriend, Alex."

"Nice to meet you," Alex said and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you too," Henry said then immediately contradicted himself. "Not a boyfriend. Come on. You were a perfect roommate. From now on it's going to be nonstop sex noises coming from your room," he whined to Vaughn.

"I sure as hell hope so," Alex told him then turned to Vaughn with a wicked look in his eyes.

"We'll keep it down," Vaughn promised Henry, but Alex disagreed.

"I plan to get loud."

"Get in there," Vaughn told him and dragged him off to his bedroom.

He turned on the lamp on his nightstand and let Alex have a look around. Not that there was much to see. A desk, a narrow bed, and a bookshelf were all the major pieces of furniture he had in his room. He kept things organized and put away, so it didn't take Alex long to form an impression.

Seeing how neat it was in there, Alex vowed, "I am going to make such a mess of this place."

"Wonderful," Vaughn said. He had a feeling he was going to let him get away with that and a lot more.

"Does it worry you that so many people are against us?" Alex said, turning to him and placing his hands on Vaughn's hips.

"Not even a little," Vaughn said and took him in his arms. "And I did just introduce you as my boyfriend."

"I noticed that. It had a nice ring to it. Was that another crazy impulse?" Alex asked him with a challenging gleam in his eyes.

"No. I considered a few other options first, but 'the guy a never want to stop fucking' didn't seem appropriate."

Alex kissed him hard. When they stopped to breathe, Vaughn asked

him, "So what are you doing for Christmas?"

"Don't know yet. And you?"

"I'm doing whatever you're doing," Vaughn told him. He had never made plans like that with anyone before. It felt good.

"In that case, get ready to meet the family, eat red bean rice cake and get interrogated about your career goals and dishonorable intentions toward me," Alex told him.

"Sounds like a plan," Vaughn said. He was only a little scared by the prospect of meeting Alex's family so soon.

They took their jackets off. When Alex saw him hang up his neatly, he huffed then hung his over the back of the chair like an act of martyrdom. Then Alex kicked off his shoes and flopped down on Vaughn's bed with a groan.

"And what are you doing tonight?" Alex asked him while looking up at him from his bed.

"Sleeping with you."

"Come here then," Alex said and opened his arms to him.

"Aren't you too tired?" Vaughn asked since Alex obviously had more in mind then just sleeping in the same bed with him.

"Who, me? You shut up."

"So you want this? You need this?" Vaughn teased him while staying just out of his reach.

"You're so full of yourself. Get over here," Alex said and pulled him into bed with him.

They didn't lie down though. Kneeling, they faced each other. Overtaken by an aching need that he never felt before, Vaughn couldn't hold back. One hand on Alex's ass, the other on the back of his head, Vaughn surged against him.

Their bodies collided, their mouths crashed together while their rough hands groped and tore at their clothes. The frenzied kiss slowed and deepened. Now they kissed and caressed with more patience and care, like they had forever to show each other how they felt.

Stopping to breathe, Alex grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed his face into Vaughn's chest, turning his head from side to side like he wanted to burrow inside him. "You make me crazy," he told Vaughn then raised his head for another kiss.

Vaughn tried to unbutton Alex's shirt while Alex tried to unzip his fly at the same time. They fought to struggle free of their clothes and strip each other, but couldn't quite manage it as they got in each other's way. Getting impatient, Alex tried to manhandle him into submission, but Vaughn made him hold still.

While Alex's shirt stood partly open, Vaughn started by kissing his throat. Opening his shirt all the way, Vaughn was kissing his way down his chest until his mouth was torturing one nipple then the

other.

His hands were busy too. One hand pinched Alex's nipple. Trailing down lazily, his other hand meandered to Alex's fly and freed his cock. Alex moaned then took in a stuttering breath as Vaughn stroked him lightly a few times.

Alex thrust into his hand, but Vaughn wasn't ready to get down to business yet. "Hold on. I want to have a good look," Vaughn told him and stripped him all the way out of his clothes.

As Alex sat back on his heels naked, Vaughn's gaze dropped from his pretty eyes to his parted lips. His hand went to his abs then down to his thigh. Alex's body was lean and smooth under his touch, the skin burning hot.

Now that Vaughn finally had Alex naked and alone, he was determined to give his body some proper attention. He made him lie down. Vaughn felt free of everything that ever held him back and kept him confined. He wanted to give himself to this thing with Alex with no reservations.

Kneeling over him, Vaughn started by taking his hand and kissing his knuckles. While Alex cupped his face with the same hand, Vaughn trailed feathery kisses up his arm. At his shoulder, he grazed Alex's flesh with his teeth then let them sink in a little. In response, Alex rose toward him and stroked his sides with a tickling touch. As Vaughn kissed his neck then his mouth, Alex wrapped his legs and his arms around him. Desire made blood rush in his veins. His heart beat only for Alex. If Vaughn dared to let this feeling take him and pull him under, Alex would own him body and soul.

"I'll never let you go," Vaughn murmured, his lips moving against Alex's throat, tongue licking at his pulse point. "You're going to be mine forever." The words flowed out of him with no conscious thought. Alex's hold on him was that strong, Vaughn's need for him bottomless.

*

Until tonight, lying in Vaughn's bed, Alex had never felt so wanted. It was like Vaughn couldn't get enough of him. His desire was a tangible force that slammed into him with every kiss and caress.

His voice was husky as he made crazy promises that echoed in Alex's heart. Vaughn's roaming hands hot on his body, mapped it like Alex was his territory now. As Vaughn groped him, Alex melted into his touch and mussed his hair. The lust in Vaughn's gaze burned him up.

Each kiss and lick moved lower, teasing him along the way. As his heart beat faster and louder, Alex shuddered and called his name. With Vaughn's mouth right over his aching, rock hard cock, Alex was

begging, "Please, Vaughn."

But when it seemed like Vaughn was ready to go to it, he had to stop him. With his hand resting on his chest, Alex restrained him then pushed him off.

"My turn," Alex gasped and sat up so he could get his hands on Vaughn.

Roughly, he removed his remaining clothes, throwing them where his own were strewn all over the floor. That didn't take long. Vaughn was stripped and his room a mess. It looked nothing like the room Alex walked into.

Now Vaughn's muscles were bare and firm under his groping hands. Vaughn had an amazing body, lean with the kind of definition that made Alex want to lick him everywhere, but he started by kissing his handsome face.

Brushing his lips over the blond stubble on his chin and around his mouth, Alex teased him. The tip of his tongue darted out and sneaked in between his parted lips before he dived in for a kiss. His mouth then traveled down over Vaughn's impressive chest while his fingertips traced the line of fine hair that trailed from his navel down to his cock.

Any minute now, his mouth would follow that same line. Seeing where he was heading, Vaughn stopped him. "No, you don't." His fingers threading through his hair, he pulled Alex up for a kiss. "You had your fun. It's my turn now," Vaughn told him and pushed him back on the bed.

Alex grabbed Vaughn's pillow and folded it up behind his head so he could lean back and watch what he was doing. First Vaughn ran his hands up and down his thighs as Alex made room for Vaughn to kneel between his legs. Vaughn leaned over his cock and took hold of his balls with a gentle, rolling motion.

The tip of his tongue stroked up the shaft then swirled the head of his cock slowly. Vaughn was in no rush. Writhing and digging his heels into the mattress, Alex got ready to suffer.

Fingers of one hand pressing down into Alex's thigh, Vaughn let his mouth play over his cock but never took him inside. His deliberate, loving touch covered every hard inch. Alex moaned non-stop. Giving him a taste of heaven then pulling back, Vaughn had him shuddering uncontrollably.

Only when he had him falling apart at the seams did Vaughn get serious. He braced himself by taking Alex's ass in a firm grip. Then Vaughn looked up at him while his mouth pushed down on his cock. It was too much. Alex was pulled under, overwhelmed by the feeling of tight, wet heat around his cock.

Vaughn's hot mouth took possession of him, made him lose himself,

but Alex still knew one thing. He needed his own lips and tongue to slide over the length of Vaughn's cock. More than ever, he needed to taste him. But stopping him was like fighting his way out of a dream. At first Alex only called his name then pushed Vaughn off him.

Vaughn panted and glared at him. "That was just getting good. Why did you interrupt me?" he growled at Alex.

"Maybe I like to torture you," Alex teased him.

Vaughn pinned him to the bed and leaned over him all sexy menace and lust. "Behave or pay the price."

"Scary," Alex purred and rolled his head back, exposing his throat for Vaughn's kiss. He felt teeth, lips and tongue. "OK. I repent. I surrender. I'm all yours."

"Good," Vaughn said then leaned in slowly for a lingering kiss that made Alex's heart pound and his whole body tingle. When Vaughn let him up, Alex forgot all about letting him have his way. He turned over on the bed so he and Vaughn were head to toe. He wanted them to sixty-nine.

"You should have waited your turn," Vaughn admonished him.

"Punish me later," Alex told him and slid his hand over his cock while letting his tongue play over his balls.

"Fuck, Alex," Vaughn cried out then he moaned around the head of Alex's cock.

Alex loved what he was doing to him, but he also loved the feeling of Vaughn's cock sliding between his lips. Silken skin and underneath it steely hardness filled his mouth. Alex swallowed him down until he hit the back of his throat. His mouth tight around Vaughn's beautiful cock, Alex sucked to the sound of his moans.

The rhythm matched what Vaughn did to him, but soon Alex lost all conscious control over what he was doing. Instinct took over and Alex gave himself up to it.

Racing to the finish, Alex hummed around his cock and hooked an arm around his thigh. With Vaughn sucking him so hard and fast, Alex couldn't hang on much longer. He didn't know if he was flying or falling because he was just going right out of his mind.

Then Vaughn was coming, filling his mouth as pleasure burst inside him. Vaughn's mouth on his cock faltered, and Alex pumped his hips uncontrollably. Thrusting into Vaughn's mouth while swallowing his come was pure ecstasy. A surge of white-hot orgasm roared through him and his come spilled down Vaughn's throat.

Breathing hard, Vaughn joined him upside down on his bed and kissed him. Their tastes mingled. They sat up and then turned over so they were right side up. Finding his pillow had been kicked to the floor, Vaughn grabbed it and tucked it under both their heads as they lay facing each other.

Two guys, one pillow, one narrow bed – Alex couldn't believe he felt so comfortable there. But it was where he belonged. Everything about Vaughn told him as much. Love in his eyes and tenderness in the way he held him, Vaughn was like a new man. Or maybe he only seemed that way because Alex hadn't really know him.

"I think I might have misjudged you," he said.

"Me too," Vaughn told him.

"Now that I know how wonderful you are, I'm never letting you get away," Alex vowed.

"You're sure I won't turn into your next bad ex?" Vaughn asked him.

"Never." Alex was absolutely sure of that.

"Even with all my faults?" Vaughn prompted him.

"What faults? I don't know what you're talking about. Who's been saying you have faults? If anyone talks shit about you, you just point him out and I'll kick his ass," Alex told him.

"It's a deal," Vaughn said with a smile.

"I mean it. I'll stick up for you no matter what," Alex said and sealed his promise with a lingering kiss.

Ready to go to sleep, Vaughn reached over for his lamp, turned it off and plunged them into darkness. Alex sighed against him while Vaughn rubbed the back of his head.

Legs twining, arms around each other, they settled in. With his head resting on Vaughn's chest, Alex wrapped his arms around him possessively. "Your heart has the best sound," he said as he closed his eyes.

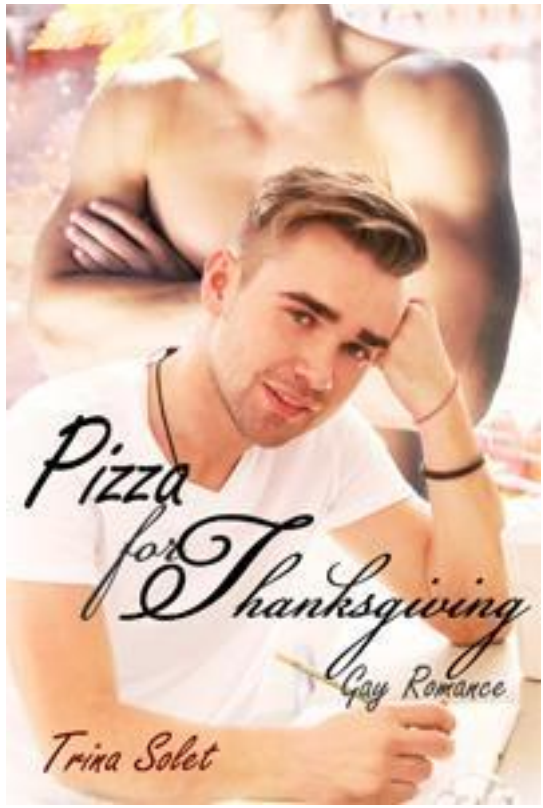
"It's all for you," Vaughn told him like he was giving him ownership of his heart.

Satisfied, lying in Vaughn's bed and in his arms, Alex didn't want to give up this moment. It was too good. He wanted to live out this moment in time forever. No dream could be better than this. He was blissfully happy, lingering on the surface of sleep until he was pulled under.

As he drifted off unwillingly, the last thing he heard was Vaughn telling him, "I think I might love you." It was only a shy whisper, but Alex fell asleep to the sound of it like it was a lullaby.

The End

Books by Trina Solet



Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?

A Christmas Boyfriend

"Can you get me a man for Christmas?"

When he said those fateful words, Ben didn't know what he was setting in motion.

Ben is a busy dad to a four year old little girl. He doesn't have much time for a social life, but he wasn't serious when he asked for a man for Christmas. His daughter, Maya, doesn't know that. She is determined to play Santa and get her dad the gift he asked for.

The man she picks for her dad is her preschool teacher, Jason Kenney. Neither Jason nor Maya think he's the right man to be a present for Ben, so why is he standing there on Christmas Eve with a gift bow in his hair?

Smarting from a recent breakup, Jason isn't looking forward to the holidays. Despite his reservations, Jason gets tangled up with Ben. There is something about Ben that he just can't resist. As their feelings intensify, will spending Christmas together turn into something more?

The Professor and the Manny

Ned needs a babysitter for his daughter, Mina. When he hires Jeff, he ends up with a manny and so much more.

Mina is a vulnerable child who has endured too many losses. Ned has given her a new life, but she doesn't come out of her shell for just anyone.

When Jeff comes into their lives, he wins her over and starts out babysitting for only a few hours a day. That's long enough for him to realize that he's incredibly attracted to Ned.

Ned feels the same way, but he's a professor and Jeff is a student at his college. Ned is determined to keep his distance. That only lasts until he learns that Jeff has been keeping something from him. When Ned finds out that Jeff has no place to live, he invites him home and hires him as Mina's manny.

There's no turning back now. Living in the same house, neither man can deny his feelings for long. But when danger disrupts their happy life, Jeff blames himself. Can Ned convince him to stay? The next time danger strikes, Jeff might be the only one who can protect what's most precious to them both.

Key To His Heart

Phillip Morton is a disciplined and self-assured young executive, but that's only on the surface. His heart is in turmoil. He has just discovered that his late brother might have left behind a child. This child is only a rumor, a possibility, but Phillip sets out to find him.

To help him with his search, he brings along Leon, his assistant. Leon is very young and new to his job. Phillip doesn't want things between them to turn too personal, but he needs Leon to keep him sane.

Even as he searches for his nephew, Phillip is afraid to hope. After the heart-wrenching loss of his estranged brother, it seems too much to expect that this child could be real.

It turns out that Ant, short for Anthony Morton Junior, is very real indeed. He is a sweet three-year-old living in precarious circumstances with an elderly relative. Phillip has found them just in time.

As Leon lends a hand with all the new challenges in Phillip's life, the two of them are growing closer every day. If only Leon can free himself of the demons from his childhood. While Leon's past still haunts him, he and Phillip can't rush into anything.

Will Phillip's love and patience win out in the end so they can all become a family?

Golden Days

How can a nerdy, young dad hope to attract his hunky new neighbor? And if he can get his attention, does he have any hope of making it last?

Kyle only recently became an adoptive father to a vulnerable little girl. He's a devoted dad, and Viv is a spirited and loving five-year-old. With the help of his little dog, Kyle worked hard to gain Viv's love and trust in record time. Now they are a family. That doesn't mean he has no room for a man in his life.

Luke has been working in a string of nightclubs for most of his adult life. It was an exciting life, but Luke had enough of it. A recent loss sends Luke into suburbia in search of a more peaceful life. The loss of his brother is still fresh, but spending time with Kyle and Viv brings him so much joy.

In the past, Kyle hasn't been lucky in love. He always goes for the wrong kind of guy. But with Viv in his life, he can't afford those kinds of mistakes.

When Luke moves into the neighborhood, Kyle ends up with two wounded souls on his hands. Good thing he has room in his heart for both of them. If Kyle can get past his fears, he might just get everything he has always dreamed of.

Staying True

Freshly out and with no experience under his belt, Troy just wants to have fun. His roommate is the first guy he has been with.

When he and Spencer get together, it's strictly casual, or so they tell each other. But the truth is that with every kiss and every touch, they are becoming too close.

Spencer doesn't have a ton of self-confidence. There is no way a skinny nerd like him can keep a guy like Troy all to himself. But how long can Spencer pretend that his heart isn't set on Troy?

And how is Troy supposed to get the experience he craves if all he can think about is Spencer?

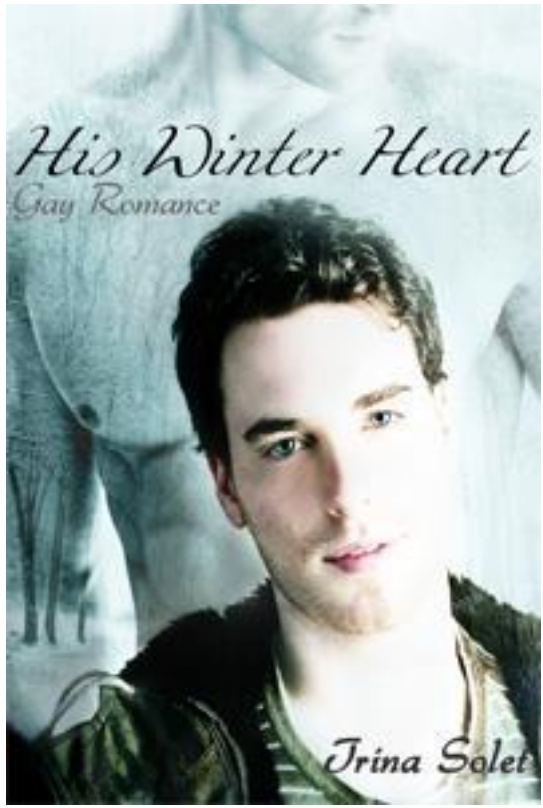
In the end, maybe all the experience Troy needs is the love of one man.

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.



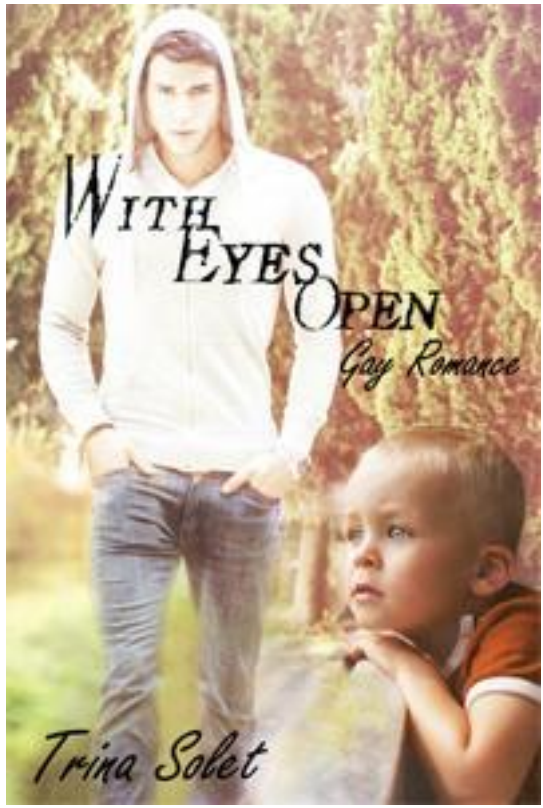
His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?



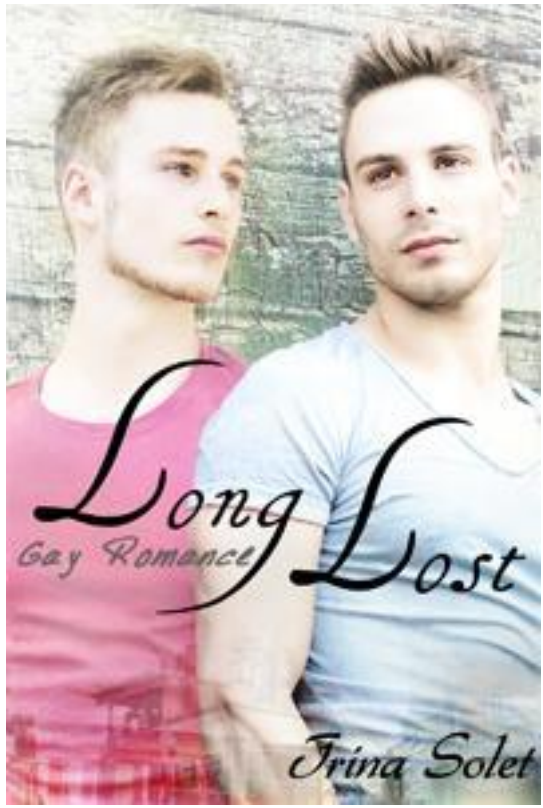
With Eyes Open

Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



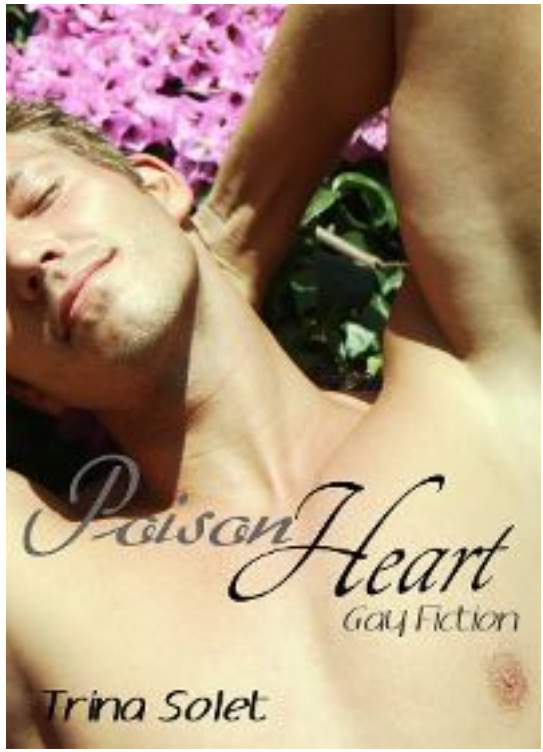
Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.

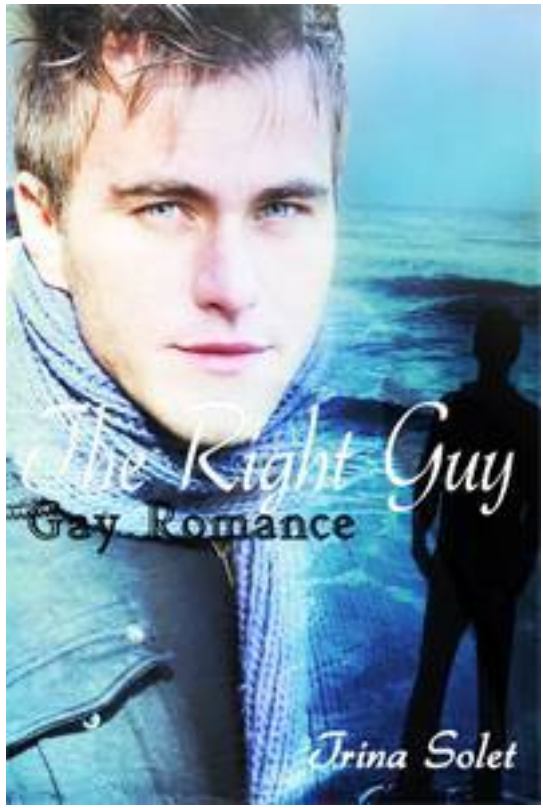


Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.



The Right Guy

They came together in paradise, but what will happen when they go back to the real world and their everyday lives?

Nathan and Paul never liked each other. Paul was a snob, and Nathan felt like he was always looking down on him. Nathan wasn't interested in him anyway. He had his sights set on Turner. Now that Turner is getting married to another man, Nathan's heart is breaking. That's when he finds that Paul is right there by his side. This gorgeous man is ready to distract him and help him get over his unrequited crush.

After being with Paul, Nathan is finally ready to move on and let go of his hopeless feelings. But after a hot encounter on the beach, Nathan might be giving up his old crush for a new one. Knowing that his longing for Paul is just as hopeless, Nathan is at his wit's end.

But things aren't the way they seem. Paul has been watching Nathan pine after his friend for too long. All that time he has wanted Nathan all to himself. It's hard for Paul to believe that Nathan could ever return his feelings. After all, Nathan doesn't even like him.

He doesn't know that Nathan feels differently about him these days. When spending time with Paul stirs unexpected feelings that are more than lust, Nathan wonders if he misjudged this man. Could Paul be the

right man for him? After chasing the wrong guy for so long, Nathan has to prove to Paul that his feelings are real. That won't be easy. Paul isn't the most reasonable guy, and he won't settle for anything less from Nathan than his whole heart.

Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don’t need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn’t know he had a daughter until she suddenly

dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?

My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.